

VICTOR D. COMRAS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is April 16, 2002. This is an interview with Victor D. Comras. Let's start off with when and where you were born and something about your parents.

COMRAS: I was born on July 4th, 1943 in Forest Hills, New York, during a very dark period in United States History. Having just come out of the Depression, our men and women were engaged in a battle for survival. This was one of the darkest periods in World War II. And my parents, like millions of Americans, were greatly worried about the course of the war and our soldiers overseas. Giving voice to their emotions, they named me "Victor." I guess that was particularly apt given the patriotic date of my birth. They never let me forget that it was something special to be an American. I'm the third of 3 children. I had a brother who's now passed away and I have a sister.

Q: Let's first talk about your father. What type of work was he involved in? What do you know about his background? Do you know what Comras means?

COMRAS: My father had immigrated to the United States in 1912 as a small boy. He came from a small, predominately Jewish village close to the Latvian-Lithuanian border. He was never sure on which side, because, when he left, it was all part of Russia. His father, Jacob, my grandfather, had served for short time in the Tsarist's Army during the Russo-Japanese War. Yet, he, and his family became an identified target of persecution during the pogroms that followed that war. He hid his family and escaped to Great Britain. There he earned enough money to transport himself, his wife, and their two children (my father Manny and my Aunt Betty) to the United States. They settled, with other relatives in Syracuse, New York. But, shortly after they arrived Jacob, my grandfather, died.



My father and Aunt worked their way through high school and college, and both earned degrees in Pharmacy. They found part-time jobs in drug stores around the city, and slowly earned enough to put down a small payment on their own Pharmacy. They opened their first Pharmacy in New York in the late 1920s. Despite the depression, they made a success of their business and were able to move to a new pharmacy in downtown New York City, near Times Square.

In 1932 my father, leaving his sister in charge of the store, took off to see the world. Traveling with a relative and friend, they went to Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Poland. They also went to visit their native village. There he met and married my mother whose maiden name was Zita Kessel and brought her back to the States. His traveling companion, my Uncle Joe, also found his wife there - He married Zita's younger sister, Claire, and also brought her back to the States.

There are many stories as to the meaning or origin of the "Comras" name. Supposedly, there is a Comras River somewhere in that part of the world and maybe the name comes from that. The other story is that it was shortened from Comerovski. There are still people named "Comras" living in Eastern Europe - in Latvia and Lithuania today. I don't know too much about the name other than it probably stems from that origin. Most are of Jewish background.

Q: Was it from a shtetls or from city folk?

COMRAS: Probably a shtetls, but again I'm not that sure. These were from small communities right along the Latvian-Lithuanian border.

Q: Your father got to the United States when?COMRAS: He came as a boy. His parents brought him here. They immigrated about 1908/1909.

Q: Where did he grow up?

COMRAS: He grew up in Syracuse, New York, and then New York City.

Q: What type of schooling did he have?

COMRAS: He went through school, including university, and was a pharmacist.

Q: So the family got right into the educational thing. Where did he go to university?



COMRAS: The University of Syracuse, where he got his pharmacy degree in the 1920s.

Q: Did he continue in pharmacy?

COMRAS: He continued as a pharmacist, has his own pharmacy in New York City for many years.

Q: What do you know about your mother's background?

COMRAS: Again, he went back to Latvia and married my mother, brought her to the United States. She was a housewife and mother. She passed away when I was just a small boy in 1952.

Q: Where you grew up, was it a Jewish community or was it a fairly mixed community?

COMRAS: I was raised in a fairly mixed community. Just after the war my parents moved to Miami Beach, Florida. That was in 1946. I spent most of my childhood in Florida. I attended Fisher Elementary and Junior High School. However, most of my high school was away from home. I attended Riverside Military Academy, which had campuses in Gainesville, Georgia and Hollywood, Florida, where it moved for the winter months. I also spent my junior high school year at Miami Beach High School. I must have been a little bit brighter at that time because Georgetown University accepted me after my 11th grade and I started at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service in 1960. I guess I never graduated from High School!

Q: How was Miami Beach at that time? It was sort of renowned later on as being a place where older New York Jews went to retire. Was that part of your environment or were you in a different part?

COMRAS: Miami Beach was a unique city, and a great place to grow up. I guess I was subjected to a number of positive influences there. This included the older generation that had come down from New York. But, my world was one of kids my own age.

Q: How did you find being a kid in Miami Beach?

COMRAS: It was a great place to grow up. We had the surf and sand; sports; boating and fishing, and plenty of sunshine. It was a safe, secure and friendly environment.



Q: What were your interests as a young lad? Were you doing much reading? Sports?

COMRAS: I guess I was a typical youngster: I enjoyed sports. I loved to read. I played chess. I went swimming and boating, and was active in the Boy Scouts.

I was very close to my brother and sister. My brother was nine years older. And my sister was seven years older. I was really the baby of the family. Both my brother and sister were an enormous influence on me, especially after my mother died. My sister, Rema, was always very interested in international affairs. She shared that interest with me. I remember that I was chosen at the second or third grade to be the junior International Red Cross Class Representative. That may have been my first and only elected office.

I remember also that my sister became interested in the work of the State Department and the Foreign Service. She talked to me a lot about it. I think she is responsible for waking up my own interest in a possible diplomatic career. I excelled in school in history and geography. And early on, I decided to work toward an international career, if possible, in the U.S. Foreign Service. I knew already by my junior year in high school what I wanted to do.

Q: Did you run across anybody who had had anything to do with that?

COMRAS: Not until Georgetown University, besides my sister, who had a strong interest in it, although she never joined the Foreign Service.

Q: You got out of Miami before the Castro revolution.

COMRAS: No, I was in Florida during the Castro revolution. I remember when he came to Miami in 1957. I remember seeing him in the Dade County public park and seeing the hero's welcome he received when he first came to the United States. I also witnessed the aftermath. The local reaction to the repression in Cuba and the waves of immigration - of those fleeing Castro's Cuba.

Q: Was Spanish a language that was around much in high school?



COMRAS: Spanish has always been an important language in South Florida. Florida was a gateway to the Caribbean and Latin America. Of course, the Cuban influx into South Florida has turned Spanish into South Florida's second language. I guess I should have learned Spanish. But, I never did. I was really never very good at foreign languages. I took Russian and French in High School and College. But, I wasn't very good. I finally did master French, but that was with a lot of help, and incentive, from my future wife, who spoke French as her first Language.

Q: Why Riverside Military Academy?

COMRAS: Well, I was pretty rebellious in my youngster. My mother had passed away when I was pretty young and it was not always easy on my father to be a single parent. As I got older, I presented a more and more difficult challenge to him. My brother and sister were already away in College. And I was pretty tough on my father. We reached a mutual agreement that it might be good for me to go away to school. Later, when I told my own kids about it, I explained that at the age when lots of kids are rebelling from home and want to run away from home, I was rebelling from Military School and wanted to run home. After two years at Riverside, I finally came home for my Junior year in High School. And I was much better for the experience. And now, I truly appreciated my father. So, in my case it had a positive affect it led to a deep bonding with my father in what would otherwise have been a very difficult time in our relationship and in my life.

Q: Military schools in that period were where you sent kids who were problems of one sort or another. The idea was to "knock some discipline into them."

COMRAS: It was meant to do that and it served me well, although at some point it was obvious that I was ready to leave that environment and so I came back to high school in Miami Beach.

Q: At high school, what were you involved in?

COMRAS: My father and I always ate dinner together. Dinner was a time for discussion and debate. We talked about current and world affairs, about culture and philosophy. My father was really one of my great teachers. When my brother and sister came home from school they also joined in. These could be some tumultuous discussions - sessions that tested our ideas and believes, and helped shape and strengthen them.



Q: How about on the religious side? Was your family orthodox or not so orthodox or did it enter at all?

COMRAS: I had a liberal American Jewish upbringing. I attended afternoon religion classes twice a week until age 13, when I had my traditional Bar Mitzvah. But, we were a lay family. We all believed in God, but were lay in our activities. We were more attached to the historical and cultural aspects of then we were to its ritual or theology.

Q: Were you picking up much about Eastern Europe. The Cold War was on and the Iron Curtain had descended. Did you pick up anything about the old country?

COMRAS: Apart from the Holocaust and the history that surrounded it, Eastern Europe was not much of a topic at home. We did discuss the Hungarian revolution. But, in our home it was overshadowed by the 1956 war in the Middle East. However, current events were a regular topic at home. Nevertheless, I followed events in Eastern Europe and Russia closely from reading newspapers, and from school - particularly at Georgetown.

Q: You went to Georgetown after leaving the 11th grade. That was pretty unusual.

COMRAS: It was. I'm still not sure quite how it happened except that I ended up taking my college boards earlier for some reason. I did want to move on to college. I guess I scored well enough and my grades were strong enough that Georgetown was interested in me.

Q: You entered Georgetown in what year?

COMRAS: 1960. And I graduated in 1964. I left in June 1964, and Clinton arrived in September 1964. One thing we had in common - Clinton and I - was a deep appreciation for Professor Carroll Quigley. Clinton spoke of him at his inaugural. Quigley had in enormous impact on me. I believe he helped better understand, and conceptualize, history and current events.

Q: What was Georgetown like when you got there?



COMRAS: Georgetown was a fascinating place. I loved it there. What a great place to study and learn about the world and foreign affairs. The education was rigorous. I was spared from the religious part. The school had strict rules. We had to wear a coat and tie to class. I don't think it's anywhere close to that today. If you lived in the dorm, as I did my first year, you had to be in your room at 8:45, with lights out at 11:00. It was a strict environment but academically it was a very challenging, open environment with a great window to international happenings. The university was involved in a great number of programs that brought foreign students to the United States to learn English or to learn about the United States. These programs were run in conjunction with various aid and assistance programs. They involved mostly Africa and Asia countries. There were always a great number of foreign students on the campus. I was privileged to be able to participate in these activities, and act as a mentor to some of these foreign students. This was a great experience for someone of my age.

Q: Did the Kennedy phenomenon, the election of 1960 and the excitement of President Kennedy, catch you all?

COMRAS: Absolutely. From Georgetown, we had a front row on what was going on in Washington. We were all very much involved with the Kennedy experience and the Vietnam experience and the civil rights experience, all of which were big issues in the 1960-'64 period. Like many of the students at Georgetown, I got wrapped up in many of these issues. I participated in some of the major Washington demonstrations. Although, I was not then against the Vietnam War, I demonstrated against the corruption of the Diem Regime. I also participated in Civil Rights sit-ins along route 40 to New York, and in Rosslyn, Virginia...

Q: What was the Route 40? This was going up to Baltimore?

COMRAS: Route 40 was then the principal highway between Baltimore and New York. All of the restaurants and other facilities were segregated along the way. There were a number of boycotts and sit-ins organized at that time to break their segregation policies and to allow blacks or people of any derivation to use the facilities.

Q: How did you find the faculty? Did you find the school rather strongly Jesuit?

COMRAS: No, the Foreign Service School was mostly a lay faculty, not strongly Jesuit, although there was certainly Jesuit involvement.

Q: Was Father Walsh still there?



COMRAS: Father Walsh, no. This was just after Father Walsh, although he had left his imprint on the School of Foreign Service and of course on its teaching of Russian history. I spoke previously of Carroll Quigley. He was truly one of Georgetown's greatest assets. was also privileged to have a number of other great professors there. They included Jan Karski, Jules Davis, William V. O'Brien, and Walter Giles. Some great names. Q: Did you find yourself concentrating in any particular area or specialty?

COMRAS: I was interested in almost anything dealing with international affairs, the State Department, Foreign Policy, National Security, Geography and History. I was very interested in U.S.-European relations.

Q: Language?

COMRAS: Language was always the most difficult for me. I started with Russian, had a real hard time, and decided that if I was ever going to master a language, it would have to be something else and so I switched over to French. I went to France in 1962 in the summer to help that along at a Classrooms Abroad organized course in French. Later on, When I joined the Foreign Service, I had four months of intensive French training. But, I credit my wife Sara with bringing me up to the fluency.

Q: How did France strike you at that time?

COMRAS: I was first in France in the summer of 1962. I was 19 years old at the time. It was Great! I remember it was not very expensive then. They were just about to devalue the French Franc. I lived with a French family and I thoroughly loved it. I loved France, still do.

Q: Were you testing the Foreign Service waters at Georgetown, getting to know anybody or what the job was about?

COMRAS: From the outset I was interested in joining the Foreign Service. I viewed that as my principal motivation and as a great challenge. I was more and more interested in pursuing an international diplomatic career. If anything I had glorified it, At the same time I was under considerable pressure from my father to go to Law School. He believed strongly that I should have a solid background in law before thinking about doing anything else. He argued that Law School would not only be good training, but would provide me a career I could always fall back on, if the Foreign Service didn't work out. He really wanted me to have a profession that, if necessary, I could practice on my own. He convinced me to go to Law School. I went to the University of Florida Law School. I graduated Cum Laude in 1966. Then, I joined the Foreign Service.



Q: Was this going to be "My son, the lawyer?"

COMRAS: It was, "Foreign Service is great, but if you don't like it, what do you do then? If they don't like you, what do you do then? If you're a lawyer, you carry your career with you. You're a professional. Then you've got a choice. You can do whatever you want."

Q: It's good solid thinking.

COMRAS: Yes. I have to say that law school, and the training I received there, proved to be invaluable to my own career and service in the Foreign Service. It gave me a sense of independence. It allowed me to stay my own person, and not fear to be critical of bad policies, or outspoken, when necessary. I was known by my colleagues for my willingness to speak out (within the confines of the appropriate channels) and let my bosses know my views. Many respected me for this. However, some of my colleagues held it against me. My tendency to evaluate and give my opinions (even when not asked) did cause me some difficulties along my career path in the Foreign Service. But, I am satisfied that my willingness to speak was more of an asset than a liability. I did make some major contributions to our policies and to implementing them.

I should tell you that both my sons also attended Law Schools. And both are now practicing attorneys in Florida.

Q: Were you at Georgetown when Kennedy was assassinated?

COMRAS: Yes. That was one of those moments in your life, and in history, you never forget. I was at a popular school hangout - Tehans Restaurant, across from the Foreign Service School, when I first heard the news of the Kennedy assassination. Students and Faculty members would regularly gather in the booths at Tehans to talk after class. It was a great hangout for those who enjoyed talking about international affairs and talking about the issues of the day, whether they be Vietnam, civil rights, or whatever they were. When we heard the news, we went out to the street to listen to car radios. It had an enormous shock on all of us. I remember, that earlier I had had the pleasure of playing touch football with Robert Kennedy. He came to the campus from time to time during the election campaign. That was during my freshman year. I also went trick or treating oHalloween to the Kennedy House in Georgetown. In fact, Jacqueline Kennedy came to the door, looked at us and said "You're too old for this," dropping candy into our mugs.



The Peace Corps was a big issue then. We often talked about joining the Peace Corps, perhaps as a prelude to joining the Foreign Service. Perhaps, if I hadn't gone to Law School, I would have joined the Peace Corps. Or, perhaps just drafted in the Army to go to Vietnam.

Q: Where did one go for girls? I assume that one went somewhere.

COMRAS: The Foreign Service had only a few girls. We went to Marymount and a number of the other schools in the area American University, George Washington. The Georgetown College of Nursing was another place we could meet girls. There were plenty of school dances and other social activities.

Q: Was there much integration at that time regarding African-Americans or Asians or Hispanics?

COMRAS: No. Georgetown itself was only integrated on a token basis. There was one black student on our hall. We all got to be close friends. In fact, just about our whole hall joined in a sit-in when he was denied access to a restaurant in Rosslyn.

Q: In 1964, you went back to Florida, the University of Florida.

COMRAS: Yes. I went to the University of Florida Law School. I can tell you that in 1964 there were no black students at the Law School and only 2 or 3 women students. Now it's about 65% women. There were just no women in law school in those days.

Q: Was it 3 years of law school?

COMRAS: Yes, normally that it so. I went through the summers also, so I finished up in 2 ½ years..

Q: How did you find law?

COMRAS: I took to it. I enjoyed it very much. I did very well in law school and could have at that point gone into a legal career. I probably would have had to go to Vietnam first.

Q: You're talking about '66.



COMRAS: I received a draft call just after graduating law school. At that point I had already been accepted into the Foreign Service. The Foreign Service left it up to the draft board whether they would defer me or not. The State Department asked for no special treatment. However, Draft Boards were known to have deferred prospective foreign service officers on a case by case basis. The Foreign Service had assigned me to Kinshasa, Zaire. I think the draft board felt that that was sufficient service to country and they deferred me. Had the State Department assigned me to Paris, I suspect that they would have drafted me. I went off to Kinshasa in 1967.

Q: You took the Foreign Service exam. Had you taken the exam early on?

COMRAS: Yes, I took the Foreign Service exam 3 times. At that time a score of 70 was a passing mark on the written. The first time I took the exam was my senior year at Georgetown. I received a score of 69. I took it again my first year in Law School. Again, I received a score of 69. I took it again the next year and got somewhere in the '70s. I passed. That was it. I guess I was fortunate that the opportunity to join the Foreign Service was there for me when I graduated from Law School.

Q: Where did you take the oral exam?

COMRAS: I took the oral exam in Jacksonville, Florida. In those days they told you right away whether or not they would offer you an appointment. I got so excited about being accepted, I decided to drive all the way home to Miami to celebrate. En route I got the biggest speeding ticket of my life!

Q: Do you recall any of the questions of the oral exam and how it went?

COMRAS: We talked a lot about the Vietnam War. That was a big issue at the time. We talked about our relationships with Europe. I remember one specific question they asked, that caused me some difficulty. It were the cultural attaché of the French Embassy in Washington and the French Ambassador was going to speak to a group in Florida, what would I put in his speech. That was a tough one.

Q. I was on with a questioner at one point and we used to play games like that. It was interesting. It really brought out things. How did you feel about the Vietnam War?



COMRAS: At that time I had bought into the domino theory. I was greatly concerned that failure to oppose the spread of communism to South Vietnam would have a direct impact throughout Southeast Asia. There were communist insurgency movements going on then throughout the region. I still believe that our actions in Vietnam, although tragic and not successful in Vietnam, helped contribute to the overall eventual stability in the region. Beyond that, I believed that the United States had committed itself and that it needed to see it through. I believed in the importance of the credibility of the projection of American power. My greatest concern was that if we did not follow-through, we would lose our credibility and that more than anything else - even more than the domino theory - would lead to a strengthening of the communist regimes and the threat that that might pose to the United States at that time. Looking back I realize that many of my ideas at the time were naive and uninformed.

On the other hand, there was this great frustration that I and many people who thought as I did as youngsters about Vietnam felt with the regime itself. We could understand supporting a democratic regime, a progressive regime, a regime that stood for what it needed to stand for in terms of the future of Vietnam and its people. We became thoroughly disenchanted with the group of people that were leading Vietnam and who we were really in bed with. That didn't necessarily say that what we were doing was wrong. It's just that we felt that we needed to use our influence as much with them in changing and reforming them and getting rid of their corruption, the worst of them, if we were ever going to succeed on the Vietnam front. That was the one negative side that many of us were very critical of the U.S. policy on - not engagement in Vietnam but tolerance of activities and people that we ought not to have tolerated.

Q: Was the University of Florida very political in those days?

COMRAS: The University of Florida was political in a very local parochial sense, but not in terms of the broader issues of Vietnam or other international issues. One could sense that local issues and football played a lot bigger on campus than any of these questions. Q: In the recent election when the presidency was in doubt, many in Florida were pretty annoyed because it was interrupting the great football rivalry. How about the University of Florida's law school? Was it looking towards Latin America?

COMRAS: I don't know that I can really say that the University of Florida Law School was looking toward Latin America. The focus of the school was on Florida itself. Most graduates were expected to practice law in a local Florida hometown environment. There were some few special courses in international law and Latin American Law, but not that much. The school was a training ground for people who would be in Florida politics and the Florida Legislature. At that time there were only three law schools in Florida. The University of Florida Law School. The University of Miami and Stetson. Now there are many more law schools. And the situation has changed dramatically since the 1960s. All the Law Schools are now much more nationally and international oriented.



Q: By the time you went back there, had the Cuban influence taken over Miami?

COMRAS: The '60s was a period of great Cuban and Latin American influx into South Florida. However, Hispanics remained an overall minority. The Cuban community did not have the political clout and power that they have today. They were a community that was just beginning to find themselves and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. It is an amazing success story. Many of the people who came over in the first waves of immigrants from Cuba, had been lawyers, doctors, professional people, and businessmen. When they arrived in Florida the only jobs they could find were as busboys and waiters at the hotels. They had to do menial jobs to support themselves. They were living 4-6 families to a house or an apartment. Within a very short time they were able to save, learn English, reaffirm their professional skills in an American context, and pull themselves up the economic ladder. Today they, and their children play a lead role in the economic life of South Florida. It took about 6-10 years for that process to happen. It was a very different situation than one sees today.

Q: What about the black community? Was this off to one side and not really something that you noticed?

COMRAS: I remember as a child all the signs of segregation in Miami. Because of my family upbringing, we were opposed to segregation. But, we saw it change only very slowly. It took Miami a long time to change. It took the great social pressures and tensions that erupted in the late '60s and early '70s between the black community and the White community, followed by increasing tensions between the black community and the Cuban community. The Black community felt that their progress out of the economic ghetto and their ability to go up the ladder of economic opportunity was being hampered or delayed by the influx of the Cuban refugees, with whom they felt had to compete. To a certain degree the new Hispanic community was displacing the black community and taking away their jobs. This gave rise to growing resentment. However, that situation is largely behind us.

Q: You came into the Foreign Service when?

COMRAS: My official day of entry into the Foreign Service was December 25, 1966. I flew from Miami to Washington DC on Christmas day. Since that was the first financial obligation the State Department incurred on my behalf that became my official day of entry into service. I actually began on January 7, 1967 when the new Foreign Service Training Class was formed at the Foreign Service Institute in Rosslyn, Virginia.



Q: Had you picked up a significant other by this point?

COMRAS: No. I was single and fancy free. But I would find the love of my life shortly, after, during my first assignment overseas.

Q: What was your A100 course like, the composition and what you got out of it?

COMRAS: It have to say that the A100 was a great introduction to the Foreign Service. I enjoyed it immensely. There were about 40 in our class. We fell into three categories. There were Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), Foreign Service Information Officers (FSIOs) for USIA and Foreign Service Staff Officers (FSSOs). The latter were hired under a new program that did not require the Foreign Service Examination Process. They were expected to serve only in Administrative or Consular jobs. As you know the Foreign Service Personnel System went through several changes since then. The FSSO category was abolished and merged into the FSO category several years later.

I can't recall the name of the Officer who ran our A100 class. He really did an outstanding job. Each day was fascinating. He also arranged for us to take a number of field trips. One trip I remember was to the AT&T Cable Plant in Baltimore. After the visit we had to write an "airgram" reporting on the visit and our observations. We were to focus on commercial opportunities.

I missed the most exciting day in the A100 course. That was the day that they announced our first assignments. I had been excused from the course for a few days so that I could take the Florida Bar Exam back home. I got back toward the end of "Assignment Day." I was going up the elevator and someone said to me, "Vic, you're going to Kinshasa." "Where's that," I said!

Q: You didn't know where Kinshasa was?

COMRAS: I had a vague idea. I knew it was in Africa. Most of the officers in my class were assigned to Vietnam. That was that period when Vietnam was taking most of the new classes. Foreign Service officers were being sent there as part of the CORDS program.

Q: Some people who were applying to come in at one stage were told, "Well, if you come in and agree to go right to Vietnam, you can come in. If you don't, we won't let you."

COMRAS: That happened right after me. There was much greater pressure on the class after mine to go to Vietnam.



Q: What about Vietnam in your class? It must have been a topic of some conversation.

COMRAS: I don't recall too much talking about Vietnam. It was a place that a lot of people felt they were going to be sent. I do not recall that the Vietnam war was then a great issue. That came later.

Q: Had you made any noises towards going to Africa?

COMRAS: They had asked us early on where we would like to go. I said I'd like to go to a small post for my first assignment. I told them I was interested in Europe but afraid that if I went to a large European post I'd be lost somewhere in the bowels of the embassy. I wanted to go somewhere where I could at least pretend I was someone important. I may have said, "Well, maybe an African post."

Q: You went to Kinshasa when?

COMRAS: I arrived in Kinshasa in July 1967.

Q: And you were there until when?

COMRAS: My assignment continued there until September 1969. This included rotation tours through the embassy in Kinshasa and at the Consulate in Lubumbashi.

Q: Was it the Congo or Zaire?

COMRAS: It was already known as Zaire when I arrived. I arrived during the final phase of the 1967 Mercenary Rebellion. The rebellion was led by a Belgian Soldier of Fortune, Jean Schramm. He led a group of mercenaries who had been hired by the Mobutu regime to fight against rebels in Katanga. When Mobutu dismissed them, they turned on his regime.

Q: Was this Shaba I or Shaba II? There was a war going on.



COMRAS: Right. Because of the first stages of that war, I was slowed down in actually going out to my assignment because the border was closed. I took the SS Independence from New York to Naples and then flew out of Naples to go down to Kinshasa. The border had just reopened and one could sense the insecurity of the place. Subsequently, I was sent down to Lubumbashi where there were still a number of Katangese gendarmes. Many had again rebelled and were operating in various groups, or as bandits. Because of the poor security situation in Lubumbashi, most dependents had been sent out. The men were housed together. We were each issued side arms and trained how to use them.

Q: Lubumbashi was old Elizabethville?

COMRAS: Yes. We did have one incident where the house that I was living in was taken over by the Katangese gendarmes. There was a short gunfight. I was cornered in the garage by one of the Katangese Rebels. He robbed me of my watch and then tried to shoot me. Fortunately for me, the gun misfired. I didn't hang around for a second shot. I just dove into the bushes and he ran away. That incident was subsequently reported in a message to the State Department by one of my colleagues.

Q: Did you go right to Lubumbashi when you arrived?

COMRAS: No. At the time of my assignment to Kinshasa, the State Department had inaugurated what it called "The Junior Officer Program." The program was meant to provide "on the job" training. Each new junior officer was supposed to rotate between various sections of the embassy. My first tour was in the administrative section. They had a hard time figuring out how they could use me. Finally, I was told to run the Motor Pool. Imagine that, 7 years of college and a rigorous examination and entry screening, and I was going to run the Motor Pool! I decided I wanted out - so I wrote a letter volunteering to go to Vietnam. The Department never responded. I stayed in the Motor Pool for almost 2 months. Then, Hubert Humphrey came along and saved my career. Humphrey, then Vice President of the United States, announced a visit to Africa and one of his major stops was going to be Kinshasa. So, the embassy finally needed me to do something. They were short-staffed on something. So I got put under the direction of the Humphrey visit control officer. I became "Deputy Control Officer.". I never looked back. And one advantage of working the Motor Pool was that I knew all the drivers on a first name basis. We had all become good friends!.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

COMRAS: The Ambassador was Robert H. McBride. He had quite a reputation. He later became ambassador to Mexico.



Q: When you're talking to your junior colleagues, what was the feeling about Mobutu at that point?

COMRAS: The embassy was very friendly to Mobutu. He was a young and upcoming leader in the 1960s. He was viewed as pro-western, pro-American and progressive. The U.S., provided him with some of his closest advisors. We were worried about communist influence in Angola at that time. Mobutu was our perfect ally. This was a very good period in the relations between Mobutu and the United States. That relationship soured later, after Mobutu began to nationalize many of the local businesses.

Q: When you were sent to Lubumbashi, what were you doing down there?COMRAS: I was sent to Lubumbashi as a rotational economic/commercial officer. That was the first time I started doing some real economic and commercial reporting. It was a small post. It was what I really envisaged I would do when I joined the Foreign Service. The CIA was a major component of our small post. I worked closely with them.

Q: Who was the consul there?

COMRAS: The consul at that time was William Harrop. He later became Director General of the Foreign Service. John Stockwell was also with us in Lubumbashi. He later gained notoriety for his book criticizing the CIA.

Q: On the Humphrey visit, how did it go?

COMRAS: Mission accomplished. The Humphrey visit went quite well. I got into exciting discussions with the pilot of Air Force II at that time about making sure that everybody got on board the plane in time, but that worked out all right.

Q: Down in Lubumbashi, what were our interests there?

COMRAS: The consulate was our eyes and ears regarding the situation in the important copper belt of Africa. We reported on the economic and security situation. We also monitoring events regarding Zaire's mining industry. And we watched carefully what was happening in neighboring areas of Angola. Katanga was a very important source for copper, cobalt, and certain other strategically important metals.



Q: You had these Katangese rebel groups, or bandits by this time. Who was keeping them out of the city?

COMRAS: It was supposedly the task of the Congolese or Zairean army to provide for local security. The local military government - his name was Paluku, I think - was a young and energetic fellow. He confronted an enormous task in pacifying the region. In our view he was doing a creditable job. There was still a very large expatriate community in Katanga. They had begun to return and to bring the mines back into operation. The price of copper and cobalt were high on the world market, providing important economic incentives to getting the mines back in operation. In fact, through that whole period of time that I was in Zaire, things appeared to be getting better. The low point seemed to be the time I arrived. When I left Zaire there was a perception of increasing optimism. Things were getting better economically and politically. Stability had returned to most regions of the country. But it didn't last long. Right around October of '69, the students at the university revolted against Mobutu and new pressures and new problems came along. The Mobutu government became more repressive and turned more nationalistic and radical. They began a program known as Zaireization - turning local business and industry over to Zaire nationals. While the goal might have been laudatory, the methodology was appalling bad. It amounted to nationalization and led to a dramatic exodus of the expatriates who were still needed to keep the business and distribution system operating. The program also brought a halt to new investment. Within a very short time, the economy was spiraling down. I was probably there during the best years of the post-independence period.

Q: Then did you come back to Kinshasa?

COMRAS: Only once in 1973 and that was to present my new son to his grandparents - my wife's parents.

This may be a good place for me to tell you about my own personal situation while I was in Zaire. I met my wife-to-be in Kinshasa. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever known. Her name was Sara. She was of Jewish Italian background. Her family had settled in Kinshasa in the early 1950s. They had fled Cairo, Egypt after the Nagib revolution. Her father ran a local import/export business. Sara was a student at Lovanium University. I was drawn to her the first time I saw her. That was at a garden party at the residence of the Israeli Ambassador on the occasion of Israel's national day of independence. I had to find a way to meet her.



As the most junior officer at the American embassy, I was assigned many of the most routine tasks. One of these was to organize the American Community showings of motion pictures we received weekly from the Armed Services Motion Picture Program. The embassy paid for these films, and had to gain reimbursement by charging admission. I was responsible to preview the films and to advertise and collect admissions. I also organized the showings. This was well before videos or satellite TV. These twice weekly films were a great morale booster.

COMRAS: My wife, Sara, was born in Egypt. Her parents were part of the Italian Jewish community living in Heliopolis. They traced their own roots back to the Island of Rhodes, which had been taken over by Italy for a short period in 1912. Following the overthrow of King Farouk, they left Egypt and settled in Kinshasa. Her father had relatives living there and they had invited him to join them in business there. This was in '52. At the time Kinshasa had a sizable expatriate community. Sara grew up there. She stayed on after high school to attend the Lovanium University, which, at the time was run by its sister university in Louvain Belgium.

Q: Was there a Lebanese community... A lot of Lebanese were in West Africa. Was your wife's family part of this Middle Eastern commercial thing?

COMRAS: There was a small Lebanese community in Kinshasa. The expatriate community was made up mostly of Belgians, Italians and Portuguese. There were also a number of Jewish families that had come out of the Egypt and other places in North Africa. Many had settled in Kinshasa during World War II, or during the post WWII period. There was also a substantial Portuguese community. Many had come to Kinshasa from Angola during the Angolan War period. Altogether there were about 150,000 expatriates lived in Zaire during the period I served there.

Q: At that point they felt relatively comfortable?

COMRAS: Yes, they seemed quite comfortable during the years I was there. That was 1967-1969. Many had left just after independence. That was a very difficult time. But, many came back once the situation settled down. Life was relatively comfortable for the expatriate community in Kinshasa all through the late '60s and early 1970s.

Q: When did you get married?

COMRAS: I got married on July 5, 1970.



Q: Did you get married in Kinshasa?

COMRAS: No, we were married in the Grand Synagogue of Brussels, Belgium. Brussels was the halfway point between her family and my family. Besides, her family had planned to spend that summer in Brussels anyway.

Q: Wonderful.

While you were there, this was quite a large embassy, wasn't it?COMRAS: Yes. You would be surprised at the size of our embassy in Kinshasa at that time. It had to have at least 75 Americans. I never had expected it to be so big.

Q: Were you attracted to Africa or did you want to get out and move around?

COMRAS: Africa is a fascinating continent. I had several tours of duty in Africa. I learned much and was glad to have had that opportunity, especially early in my career. From Kinshasa, I was assigned back to Washington. Because of my legal education, I was posted in the General Counsel's Office of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. It was my first legal position with the Department. My next assignment was to Ibadan, Nigeria. And that was followed shortly by an assignment to Durban, South Africa. This was before the Department had instituted its open assignments program. Assignments were made by a special panel. The officer in question had little say in the matter. One didn't know one's next assignment until the assignment had been finalized. But, there was a reasonably good chance that the assignment would be to a post within the same geographic bureau, unless, the officer, the bureau had made it clear that he wanted out. Once you were in a bureau, you could expect to stay in that bureau unless you really didn't like them or they really didn't like you. If that were the case, you had to start afresh in a new bureau.

Durban, South Africa was my last assignment in the African Bureau. As that tour was coming to an end I waited impatiently to learn of my next assignment. When it came, I was far from thrilled. I had been assigned as deputy protocol officer on loan to the Spokane International Exposition. That didn't appeal to me. Besides, I never felt that protocol was one of my better suits. I began to look for alternatives, and to consider if I really wanted to remain in the Foreign Service.



Earlier, when I had worked in the General Counsel's office at ACDA, I had been responsible for supervising a contract the Agency had with Harvard Law School. It involved a study of Chinese Attitudes Toward International Law. I worked closely on this with some members of the Harvard Law School Faculty. Well, I wrote to some of them, and when I was back in the States I made a trip up to Boston. I learned of an international legal studies program that was underway. I decided to ask for a leave of absence from the State Department and to join that program.. To make a long story short, my assignment to Spokane was broken and I did a year of international legal studies at Harvard Law School. I used that year to get an LLM degree in international law and international trade law. And I began thinking again about a legal career outside of the State Department.

Q: We'll go back. You came back to Washington in 1969.

COMRAS: Right.

Q: With ACDA? Was it called that then?

COMRAS: Yes, ACDA stood for Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. It was a separate government agency. Gerard Smith was director of the agency at that time.

Q: You were doing that from '69 to when?

COMRAS: I was assigned to ACDA from August 1969 to July 1971.

Q: What was your job?

COMRAS: I was assigned as an Attorney Advisor to the Office of the General Counsel.

Q: This was early in the Nixon administration, SALT I. This was what you were doing?

COMRAS: Yes, this was the period during which SALT I was negotiated. I did some work on SALT, but most of my responsibilities dealt with other matters. My principal tasks were to handle contract and administrative law issues for the agency. I handled wage and pension problems, polygraph and privacy issues, personnel problems and contract and supply matters. I also did some general international law work.



Q: How did you feel about ACDA? Was it in the mainstream off to one side?

COMRAS: This was the heyday of ACDA. Gerard Smith was a very strong personality. SALT was a big issue with our delegations involved in a whole range of disarmament discussions with the Russians in Geneva, chemical and biological warfare issues and nuclear issues, missile issues. It was a very exciting place to be. It brought together some of the best people from State, Defense, Energy, and other agencies. It was a very enjoyable period.

Q: I'm interviewing Tom Graham now.

COMRAS: Tom came along and for one of the 2 years was my boss in ACDA. Please give him my best regards.

Q: I certainly will.

What was the attitude towards SALT? What was the feeling about these talks? Were they going anywhere? Was it optimistic?

COMRAS: Yes, there was a great amount of optimism that we were doing the right thing and that we had to proceed. One of the projects that I worked on was the issue of breaches of treaty. One issue that came out of SALT that I had to research thoroughly was a discussion between the Russians and the Americans about their relative records in carrying out their treaty obligations. Gerard Smith had charged that the Russians often broke their obligations. The Russians leveled similar charges against us. Smith asked me to research the history on this, and provide him with an extensive memo regarding our treaty obligation record. In particular, he wanted to know if we had ever unilaterally violated or abrogated a treaty. It was one of my first major research projects as an attorney in ACDA. And I had to give him the hard facts.

Q: What did you find out?

COMRAS: That we had broke our very first treaty. This was a Friendship, Navigation and Consular Treaty we had with France. During what became known as the XYZ Affair, Congress chose unilaterally to abrogate the agreement. This was one of only many treaties we found we didn't like, and pulled out of.

Q: What was the feeling about trying to reach an agreement with the Soviets? Was the feeling that you could come to legal agreements?



COMRAS: Yes, but always with great suspicion and the need to be able to verify. The biggest and most difficult issue in every arms control agreement was verification. We knew that verification rights had to be an essential element in every arms control agreement we made with the Soviet Union. These provisions often became the major stumbling blocks inhibiting agreement. However, as technology advanced, and national, non intrusive means to verify were developed, the verification issues began to soften.

Although we were engaged mostly in discussions with the Soviet Union, we began to ponder eventual agreements with the Chinese. Could we trust the Chinese to carry out international arms control agreements. This was at a time when there was growing tension and rivalry between the Chinese and the Soviet Union. We were also quite nervous about Chinese advances in WMD and missile delivery systems. A national debate was underway concerning the possible development of a anti ballistic missile (ABM) System to deal with a growing threat from both China and the Soviet Union.

The agency had begun to ponder possible future arms control discussions with the Chinese, but they needed information on Chinese attitudes towards such international agreements. This was the genesis of the contract I conducted with Harvard Law School.

Q: This was where your Harvard connection developed.

COMRAS: Yes.

One of the other major projects that I handled during this period was the agency's growing concern with breaches of security. There were contradictory pressures on the agency in this regard. On the one hand, the Administration wanted to clamp down on security breaches. This was the period of the Pentagon Papers and growing domestic opposition to the Vietnam War. On the other hand, there was a growing national concern with the need to better protect our rights of privacy. This was a big issue being championed by Senator Erwin.

The legislation that had established ACDA contained a provision requiring that the Agency apply Security Standards "no less stringent than the most stringent standards applied by any other government agency." It was my task to figure out what this meant. In particular, our Agency director wanted to know if we should put in place a polygraph test as part of the Agency's security clearance process, and/or whether we should subject all current employees to a polygraph as a condition for retaining their clearances.

I had to determine if requiring a lie detector test was necessary under the legislation, and whether such practices would contravene other privacy rights and considerations enacted by Congress.



Q: Did you get any feel for the role of Henry Kissinger? Was he a dominant force?

COMRAS: There were a number of "big guys" around during the late 1960s. It seemed that all of Nixon's appointee's knew how to play "hardball."Q: During the time you were there, he would have been National Security Advisor.

COMRAS: That's right. When I was in ACDA he was National Security Advisor. He came over as Secretary of State later.

Q: We're sticking to ACDA for the time.

COMRAS: When I was at ACDWilliam Rogers was still Secretary of State.

Q: Was Gerald Smith off somewhere else? Did you see much of him?

COMRAS: Smith was usually in Geneva. But, I did see him on regular occasions. I often attended meetings with him.

Q: What was your feeling about the legal world as seen from the State Department and international law?

COMRAS: Although there was growing skepticism during the late 1960s, support for international law and the rule of law in international affairs was still firm. There were attempts to reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union on a number of issues. We also looked for greater cooperation within the UN system. Major international initiatives were underway on arms control and in other areas as well. This would continue through the 1970s with new initiatives in creating and solidifying new international law. New areas were being addressed regarding international trade, corrupt practices, the environment, arms control and what some called "common heritage of mankind" issues. Much attention was being given at that time to the work of the American Society of International Law and other international non-governmental organizations seeking to strengthen and codify international law.

Q: Was there enough of a body in international law so there was the equivalent to the Supreme Court, somebody in the Hague?



COMRAS: There is an International Court of Justice (ICJ). It was the successor court to the Permanent Court of International Justice established under the League of Nations. The UN charter gave it new life and a new, strengthened mandate. This mandate was supported by additional international agreements providing the court increased jurisdiction. The United States was among the strongest supports of the ICJ. During the 1950s and 1960s we sought to strengthen the role of the court and the role of international law generally. There were a number of landmark cases brought to the ICJ during that period of time. There was also a growing debate in the United States concerning the merits and drawbacks in building an international body of law, not only binding on states, but supported by some kind international enforcement mechanism. World Peace Through World Law was one such scheme. During that time people interested in international affairs strongly debated whether the UN ought to become something more than it was. International peace through the rule of law was a theme you'd hear everywhere.

Q: There developed starting with the Reagan administration that, yes, we have treaties and laws, but let's go ahead and do it if it suits our national interest. I'm thinking of things like mining of Nicaraguan ports. It got kind of worse later.

COMRAS: I guess the United States liked the idea of holding the Soviet Union accountable to international norms and concepts, but wished to have a freer hand vis a vis its own actions. Our motives mostly were good motives. However, legal principals can limit actions, even those taken in the name of democracy and justice. Our appreciation for international law began to decline, I believe, about the time of the Iranian revolution. Iran's actions and its taking of diplomatic hostages was a flagrant violation of international law. But all the law on our side did nothing to get the hostages released or home. Iran had so blatantly violated international law and gotten away with it. And the law provided no basis for resolving the issues or the crisis. The violation was so clear and the issues were so clear and there was no justification. This crisis was followed shortly by the Soviet repression in Poland and its invasion of Afghanistan. This doomed the Carter administration and its detente approach. These actions were great blows to detente, and to popular notions of international law, peace and stability. The election of Reagan, I believe, marked a period of new and greater public skepticism of the value of international law and the lack of any means to enforce it. So, you moved from a high point down very quickly to a great skepticism about the value of international law in international relations.

Q: You were doing this from '69 to '71?

COMRAS: I was doing ACDA from '69 to '71.

Q: Where were things by the time you left? How did you feel about ACDA's work?



COMRAS: I had a very positive view about ACDA and the important role it played in building the foundation for WMD stability in a dangerous world. Some very positive steps were taken at that time to reduce the nuclear threat. These included the SALT agreements, which represented the first major reduction in nuclear weapons. During his first 4 years in office Nixon was a very strong, respected president. Of course, Watergate followed, and destroyed his presidency. When the Watergate scandal broke, I was already overseas again. This time in Ibadan, Nigeria.

Q: You went there from '71 to when?

COMRAS: I arrived in Ibadan in the summer of 1971. I left Ibadan on a direct transfer about 10 months later. I was supposed to stay in Ibadan for a 2 year assignment. I was not unhappy to have the chance to leave earlier.

In my view Ibadan was a post too many in Nigeria at that time. Apparently the State Department agreed and marked Ibadan for early closing. In 1971 was hit by a major budgetary crisis. The Department began looking at how it could downsize its presence overseas, particularly in Africa. There was discussion about consolidating posts and establishing regional embassies. Of course, special attention focused on the need to maintain consulates in addition to embassies. While Ibadan had been important during the period of Nigeria Confederation, it had lost most of its political importance following the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. That War really ended confederation in Nigeria, and led to the centralization of political power in the capital. There was very little interest in our reporting from Ibadan. In fact, the Department even complained that our consulate - which then had 7 officers was 'over-reporting' items of marginal interest. The Department decided to either downsize or close Ibadan, and I was direct transferred to Durban, South Africa, where a vacancy needed to be filled quickly.

Q: Let's talk about Ibadan, '71 to '72. What was the situation there? This was in Biafra?

COMRAS: No, Ibadan was the capital of Nigeria's Western Province (Yorubaland). I was there just at the tale end of the Biafran War.

Q: Biafra is not even a term that's used anymore.



COMRAS: The war did not touch Ibadan, or the Western State directly. It was centered in the Eastern Province, then known as Biafra. But the Biafran war had an enormous impact on all of Nigeria and changed dramatically the whole way in which Nigeria governed itself. It changed the country from a confederation to one where the power resided with a military click in Lagos. Before the war the various provinces or regions held most of the power with a relatively weak central government in Lagos. The Biafran secession had led to the strengthening of the central government at the cost of the regional government and capitals. All power ended up in Lagos with the regional governments playing a decreasingly important role. When Nigeria had become independent, it seems appropriate for us to have consulates in each of the regional capitals. That rationale lapsed after the Biafran war. By the time I was assigned to Ibadan, the Yoruba leaders were no longer playing an important national political role. Control was in the hands of a military government in Lagos. What was happening in Ibadan was of less and less interest to policymakers in Washington. So, the decision was made to close that post.

Q: What were you doing while you were there?

COMRAS: Not much. We had 7 American officers at Ibadan, Nigeria. What we were doing mostly was squabbling among ourselves for whatever there was to do. There wasn't enough to go around. I was mainly responsible for economic reporting. I took a number of field trips and tried to keep Washington and the Embassy in Lagos aware of the deteriorating economic conditions in the interior of the country. But, much of the reporting we produced as a post was of only very marginal value.

Q: Where did the Yorubas fit in? How would you characterize them?

COMRAS: The Yorubas constituted one of the more important groups in Nigeria. They had provided Nigeria with some of its most important political leaders in the post-independent period. But, there was also a building tension between them and the Hausa Fulanis in the north. Yorubas were mostly Christian. Hausa Fulanis were uniformly Moslem. They felt they were being disposed by the Yoruba leadership when it came to running the country. The Hausa Fulanis, however, did control the arms forces. It was almost inevitable that they would take over the government. The Biafrans, like the Yorubas, feared the growing power of the Hausa Fulanis. Since Biafra controlled Nigeria's Oil Wealth, they thought they would be better off pulling out of the Nigeria confederation, precipitating the Biafran War.

The Yorubas will always be a major player in Nigeria, but they are likely to be held in check by Nigeria's military leadership, which is much more strongly oriented towards the North. With movement of the capital to the north of Nigeria, there has been a diminution of Yoruba authority even more. Where that will go in the future, I have no idea. I've been away from it too long. This is a 1970s perspective of Nigeria.



Q: Did you feel that you were becoming an African hand by this time?

COMRAS: I thought it was likely that I would remain in the African Bureau. I enjoyed it. I didn't know how I was going to take to South Africa, after having served in Zaire and Nigeria. I was also concerned that serving in South Africa might be a negative in building a career in the rest of the African bureau. At that time South Africa was a world apart. I could not help but wonder what I would do after South Africa. My record in Durban was a very strong, and I thought I had left a very good impression on those leading the Bureau at that time. Maybe not. The next assignment that came out of the system for me was to the international Spokane Fair. To this day, I have no idea where that assignment came from.

Q: Who was our ambassador when you were in Nigeria?

COMRAS: Ambassador Reinhart.

Q: Were you watching the absorption of functions by the military in Yorubaland at that point?

COMRAS: What we were seeing were the frustrations of the political leadership of the Yorubas. They felt powerless to deal with the issues in the way that they wanted to deal with them. The military had taken hold of the whole country. A Military Governor was appointed to run the Western Region. Civilian politicians appeared powerless. Some of them sought to build pressure to push the military out, but they were not strong enough to do that. They were simply frustrated. Q: Had the oil wealth begun to hit the area? One heard about the tremendous backlog of ships and all this.

COMRAS: Oil was at a standstill because of the Biafran war. It was just coming back on line while I was there. But, remember, while oil was important to Nigeria, it was a coastal commodity. It had no direct benefit at that time for the economy of the Western region. The only oil up where we were was cocoa oil - and the price for Cocoa was down at that time.

Q: You were doing economic work. What was the cocoa market like at that time?

COMRAS: It was not that good. This was not a prosperous period for Ibadan or Yorubaland.

Q: Was cocoa sort of taken care of by a cocoa board in London?



COMRAS: Yes, but of course we reported on local attitudes on the crop, on projections on the crop, other economic activities, whatever they might be. But it was a pretty depressing story at that point.

Q: Did you get any feel for the cultural life of the area?

COMRAS: Very much. Of our 7 officers, 2 of them were U.S. Information Service officers. Ibadan also boasted a good university - the University of Ibadan, which was a major cultural center for Nigeria. The Yoruba people are a very artistic people. They have produced a number of Nigeria's most famous artists and the world's most famous artists of African descent. So it was a rich cultural life.

Q: How did you feel about going on? Did it bother you too much to be leaving there?

COMRAS: No, I was delighted to be reassigned for a number of reasons, most important of which was boredom.

Q: I think this is a good place to stop. We'll pick this up in 1972 when you're off to Durban, South Africa.

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Today is April 18, 2002. In 1972 you've been ripped untimely from Ibadan and off to Durban. How did you find Durban?

COMRAS: Durban was a very different place than Ibadan, Nigeria. The contrast between the two cities is enormous. And moving from Ibadan to Durban in just one day emphasized for me the contrast. Durban is a very beautiful, modern, economically vibrant city. In 1972, life there was very reminiscent of Europe of the '50s. Durban is both a port city and beach city, attracting tourists from around the world.

Durban, in 1972, while beautiful and comfortable, was also a very troubled city. Apartheid gave it an unnatural feel, and ate at the very soul of the city. Many of the people we met and knew in Durban were torn within themselves by their conflicting desires to be accepted as part of the modern world, yet knowing that the apartheid system they had created or accepted was a stigma the rest of the world would never condone. Many recognized also that the apartheid system could never hold. Yet, they remained deeply fearful of changing it. Some sought to justify apartheid as ordained, or necessary for their survival. But, one sensed that they all knew that it was not something that could last.



I think the mood in Durban was different from the mood in other areas of South Africa. Doubts about apartheid were more pronounced in Durban, which had a more liberal English background. This was an English speaking area of South Africa and many of the whites living there still felt very close ties to Great Britain. The English South Africans also considered themselves a minority, dominated by the larger Afrikaans community elsewhere in South Africa. This gave them the false solace that could blame apartheid on the Afrikaners, even if they chose to live apartheid themselves everyday.

Interestingly, Durban became the first testing ground for a new U.S. approach to South Africa and Apartheid - constructive engagement. I arrived in Durban just as this policy began to emerge.

Q: You were there from '72 to when?

COMRAS: I was in Durban from 1972 to late 1974.

This was the period when we began applying the new policy of constructive engagement toward South Africa. The heart of this new policy was to engage South Africans in a manner conducive to persuading them to soften, and to eventually abandon their apartheid policies. This included encouraging American companies and investors to adopt non apartheid labor practices. It also meant empowering black South Africa's economically so that they would literally "vote" with their "rand." It involved adoption of the so-called Sullivan Principles for American companies and investors. It also involved what became our Post's hallmark policy "Multiracial Entertaining." All social engagements sponsored by the American Consulate in Durban forthwith were to have a "multiracial" character. We afforded an opportunity in Durban, for the first time in decades, for South African Whites, Blacks and Indians to sit down together, or to mingle together in a social setting, and to get to know each other. If we had a dinner or a cocktail party or any other kind of a social event, we made sure that our guest list included representatives of all communities of South Africa. We always included Blacks, Indians, Afrikaners and English South Africans.

Q: Was this a Zulu area?COMRAS: Yes. Durban is the capital of the Natal province, where most of the Zulu's in South Africa lived. There was a Zulu township adjoining Durban known as Kwa Matsu. The Zulu leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, was based in Natal. He was the leading political spokesman for the Zulu people. There was also a very large Indian population in Natal and Durban. South Africa had established a special segregated university for the Indian population just outside of Durban.



South Africa's Indian population had arrived around the turn of the century to work on the growing sugar cane plantations established in Natal.

I should also mention that, besides Buthelezi, there were a number of other rising young Black leaders. The black youth were going through their own awakening and beginning again to take more radical stands against apartheid. Once such leader was Steve Biko. Unfortunately, he was subsequently beaten and killed while in South African police custody.

Q: He was killed in the police jail.

COMRAS: That's right.

Q: How big was the consulate? Who ran it? What was your job?

COMRAS: We had only a small Consulate General in Durban. It was manned by three officers. The consulate general was a Senior Foreign Service Officer, Ed Holmes. I was his second with the title of "consul. " I acted functionally as the political-economic officer. The third officer provided consular services, and helped out on the other issues as required. While we ere a small consulate size-wise, we took on great importance as a U.S. outpost in South Africa. We were a very busy post. Durban is a very important port city. But, perhaps our most important function was to test the application of the U.S. governments new constructive engagement policies. We became the testing ground for the idea of using our post to foster social contact between the different races in South Africa. We were the testing ground for multiracial entertaining.

Q: Had it started when you were there?

COMRAS: It had started before I arrived. The previous consul general before Ed Holmes was Ed Dugan, who was blind, and therefore certainly color blind. He had pushed for this for quite a while and had gotten a green light finally. He began the practice of multiracial entertaining/ Ed Holmes continued and built on this approach. I believe I also contributed to this process.

The rationale for multiracial entertaining, as I mentioned earlier, was constructive engagement. We wanted to engage South Africans in a process that would undercut apartheid by setting examples, and by adopting our own practices that would undercut Apartheid, and convince White South Africans of its detrimental effect on their own interests. We provided a social meeting place for South Africans of all races to gather in a relaxed atmosphere as equals, and to get to know each other.



The next step after multiracial entertaining, was to force South Africa to begin to interact with Black American diplomats. As a first start on that, the Department assigned a black American officer to the Office of Southern African Affairs in Washington. He was assigned responsibility for South African economic issues. His name was Ollie Ellison.

The second step was to send him on an official orientation trip to South Africa. The Department sent him TDY to South Africa to see what the consequences would be. The Department wanted to determine if this could work and how we might make it work and how we could push to make it work. It was decided that this experiment should begin in Durban, as our post was already engaged in multiracial activities. Also, it was commonly held that South Africans of English decent, which made up the majority of the White population in Durban, were more liberal than their Afrikaans brethren. This was not always the case, but anyway that was the assumption. So, Ollie Ellison flew into Durban. I was assigned to accompany and work with him as the economic-political officer of the consulate. We scheduled a number of social and office events around Durban and Natal, and into the Transkei. After a successful first week we undertook a long two-day road trip from Durban to Elizabethville, where I would hand Ollie over to my counterpart from our consulate in Cape town. Our first week had been very useful and smooth. It was clear that the South African government was making every attempt to make sure that there would be no problems. My wife decided to accompany me and Ollie. (end of tape)

We took a road trip to Umtata, the capital of Transkei, which was one of the then so-called Bantustans- Semi autonomous areas set aside under the apartheid system as homelands for South Africa's different Black tribes.

Q: The so-called "separate homelands."

COMRAS: That's right. These were the African homelands. Umtata was the capital. It was like going way back in time to another time in Africa's colonial history. It was like pre World War II Africa. The whites living in these areas were really living in an earlier age. If we were going to have a problem traveling with Ollie, it was going to be here in Umtata.

We arrived in Umtata in the late afternoon. We had reservations at Umtata's establishment hotel - an old colonial structure. All the guests were white. Blacks were employed only in the more menial jobs. This was a colonial style hotel in the old tradition, with ballroom dining facilities. This was apartheid in its strictest form. We were staying in an all-white establishment where Blacks could only act as servants. We could sense the tension that surrounded us the moment we arrived. Ollie was probably the first black ever in history to stay at that hotel.



We moved into the dining room and when we walked into the dining room, you could hear a fork or a knife cutting butter, just deadly silence. But, we acted as nothing was happening, completely oblivious to the surrounding tension and silence. My wife was so very natural, and our diner conversation was so normal. Ollie also appeared at ease. And after about 10 minutes, the room began to return to its own normalcy. The level of chatter began to build through the hall, and the pace of activity increased. The moment had been absorbed! We had tested apartheid in its strictest environment, and we had prevailed!

The South African government had its own reasons to see us succeed. They decided they would do their part to make the Ollie Ellison visit a success. I don't know for sure what steps they undertook on the side but, I'm sure that their Bureau of State Security (AKA BOSS), was shadowing us the whole time.

The next day we went to the dining room for Breakfast, and everything was natural and normal. After breakfast we packed the car and left for the drive down to Elizabethville. Everything had gone smoothly. Our mission was accomplished. We handed Ollie over to our colleagues, and they flew down to Capetown.

An editorial comment: Ollie never really got the credit he deserved for breaking the South African color barrier, and for his part in helping to undermine Apartheid. It seemed that all the credit went to the next officer, James Baker, who was actually assigned as the first black American officer at the embassy in Pretoria. I don't want to detract in anyway from the credit that goes to James Baker. He did a terrific job there under the most difficult of circumstances. But, I must note that his assignment to South Africa was made possible only because of the breakthrough that Ollie Ellison had made. Ollie certainly deserves a lot more credit then he ever got from the U.S. Government or Press for his bravery and his acumen and the way he handled himself in South Africa.

Q: Did you find that Durban society responded positively to this opening up? I've heard sometimes when we end up getting people together, it's the first time various groups have had a chance to talk to each other.



COMRAS: That is right. It was gratifying for us to see the positive reactions and effects that came from bringing people on different sides of the apartheid barriers together for the first time to talk and meet with each other and to get to know each other. Let me tell you about one such occasion. I had made contact with a black magistrate serving in Kwa Matsu, the black suburb of Durban. In fact, he was the first black magistrate appointed under apartheid in South Africa. His jurisdiction was strictly limited to dealing with disputes and disturbances among black residents of Kwa Matsu. He had no authority over whites. But, he was a very smart, well educated, cultured and otherwise impressive person. But, even he needed a pass to be in Durban after 6 PM. We had invited him to dinner. In order for him to attend, we had to go and fetch him with an official Consulate Car and to bring him back home when the dinner evening ended. I just loved to see the impression he made on several of the white businessmen we had also invited that evening. It took them a while to relax and to enter into direct discussions. At first we had to act as intermediaries, or as catalysts to get the conversations going. But, when they began talking with him, you could see just how impressed they were and interested in his background and views. You could almost see these light bulbs go off in people's heads. They were fascinated. This result was repeated time and time again when we brought such people together. And the results were astounding. Many of these new relationships endured to both communities advantage. Many of the people who met across the racial barriers at our home stayed in touch.

Q: Did the black Africans bring their wives? This often is a problem.

COMRAS: On occasion. But often not. Many of the Blacks living in Kwa Matsu were there only temporarily and had left their wives back in their traditional home areas far away from Durban. Others were more established in the urban black areas around Durban. Among the educated blacks and the activist black community, both the husbands and wives were engaged in the same efforts and struggles. Many had wives that were as educated and active as they were. This latter group usually brought their wives with them. And in some cases it was the wives that brought their husbands along.

Let me regress and go back to the situation in Ibadan, Nigeria. There we had a unique neighbor, Chief T.S. Oni. He was a Yoruba Chief with many, many wives. In fact he had so many wives that he had an apartment complex beside his house in which to house them. He had so many kids that he had built his own school for them. We used to wonder whether, when we invited him to dinner, he would bring a wife and how many. Truth was he never came with a wife. Sometimes he brought a son, but never one of his wives. A very different situation than the one we found in South Africa.

Q: What about commercial and political life in Durban? Were particularly the businesspeople chafing under the rule of the Afrikaans?



COMRAS: When I was in Durban there was a general sense of prosperity and well-being among the white population, and growing frustration and discontent among the non White groups. The whites had it quite comfortable. The English South Africans liked to blame Apartheid, and its evils on the Afrikaans, but really did little or nothing to change the system. There were exceptions, of course. Some important exceptions. English South Africans who were truly opposed to Apartheid, but they were relatively few in number. There were even some Afrikaans in Durban who worked against the apartheid system. But the State was usually very harsh with them.

As a general rule, apartheid was not as strictly applied in Durban as elsewhere in South Africa. Officials in Durban seemed somewhat more tolerate of apartheid violations. They even left an area in Durban as non-rationally designated, where members of the various races could mingle. This included two or three restaurants that catered to mixed groups. The Consulate often used these restaurants to meet with non-whites or to host whites and non whites together. I don't think such an area existed in any of the other South African cities.

Also, the Port area was a non-designated area. This was to permit crews to come ashore and to hang out in an area that remained apart from Durban city itself.

I remember that one Friday evening, when I was the officer on duty, I got a call from Durban's chief of police. I knew him well from my various consulate functions. He asked me to help him resolve a very serious and embarrassing problem - a problem that could only arise in an apartheid system.

At that time American ships called regularly at the port of Durban. These ships had mixed crews, and the crews were generally allowed ashore, but limited to the designated port area, where apartheid was generally overlooked. Well it so happened that a black American crew member went ashore and got drunk. He decided to go from Bar to bar looking to make a deal. He had some hashish, he said, and wanted to trade it for a gun. Was anybody interested? Well he fell upon a street-clothed Durban policeman. The policeman agreed to meet him at a designated spot for the trade. And when the Black American showed up with the hashish, the policeman and a colleague were ready for him, and arrested him. I guess that policeman was new to the beat!



The arrest of a Black American in the Durban Port Zone did not go down well with police headquarters. To make things worse, his ship sailed while he was in their custody. That is the last thing they wanted to happen. No matter what, the arrest risked creating a major international incident. The United States, they knew, would not stand by and allow this Black American to be tried and convicted in an apartheid court, or sentenced to an apartheid prison. They were in a real quandary. What were they going to do with him. They realized that they really didn't want this guy. They needed some way out. That's why they called me. Normally, it would have been the person arrested who contacted us first. Not the police, and certainly not the police chief.

Well, I think the chief of police was happy that he called me, for we found a solution to his problem. With a bit of discussion and negotiations I got the police chief to turn the guy over to me. He wasn't going anywhere, anyway. I also got in touch with the shipping agent. We worked it out that the Shipping agent got the fellow a ticket to fly to the United States on the next plane out of South Africa. And we accompanied him to the airport. You know, if the fellow had been white, he still would probably be in prison in South Africa.

Q: What were some of the opinions of how the thing could end? Nobody was thinking about... It didn't seem too likely at least to outsiders that you were going to end with a relatively peaceful collapse of the apartheid system.

COMRAS: No, I think the outcome was clear, even in the 1970s that the apartheid system would fall. It had to fail, that was obvious to any observer. But, what was not clear was the way in which that would come about. I think that there was a race between various forces and movements at that time. The South African government, even the staunchest apartheiders, had recognized that the apartheid, in the form that it was in, could not last. The government's approach was to find new ways to segregate the population. They developed the idea of depriving most Black South African of their South African nationality, by creating new mini-states or "bantustans" for them. Each of these mini-states, they planned, would have some form of independence but would remain dependent on white South Africa. This would leave a neater balance between South Africa's whites and the remaining coloured and Indian residents. There was even talk of creating a coloured and an Indian "Bantustan," if necessary to preserve white power. I think a lot of the South African people knew and understood that that was not going to work, that the Africans weren't going to accept this as a solution.

Meanwhile, there was a general increasing radicalization within the non-white groups in South Africa, and increased hostility to apartheid from the international community. The Black leaders used both radicalization and the government's own Bantustan policy to give them a platform (and increased negotiating leverage) to deal with the South African government and establishment. Zulu leader Gastha Buthelezi was particularly adept at turning the Bantustan policy to his best advantage in pressing and embarrassing the South African government.



The Bantustan policy was also a tactic the South African government tried to use to fragmentize the black South African groups. They tried to get them to think as different tribes and to format competing interests and differences between them. They wanted the Blacks to fight among themselves so that they could not present a united front.

A group of liberal Afrikaners who had recognized that the Bantustan policy was going nowhere, began to advocate a new system based on a system of separate parliaments for whites, blacks, coloured and Indians that would answer to one united executive. The idea was to create some political balance between the different groups. This, they argued would buy additional time to acculturate the Blacks and bring them into a more unified system. There was also the suggestion by some, that the Indian and coloured populations could be given greater political rights and brought into the white side of apartheid in order to better balance the Blacks in South Africa. In the end, apartheid fell of its own weight. It simply was worth keeping in place. And a majority of South African whites recognized this. Considerable credit must be given to the leaders of all of South Africa's constituent for their perseverance, wisdom, moderation and leadership in bringing apartheid to a peaceful close.

Q: What about some of the personalities... Did you get a feeling for Buthelezi, about what he was doing? How was he viewed by our consul?



COMRAS: Gastha Buthelezi was one of our very good contacts. The Consulate had recognized early on that he was going to be one of the principal figures within the Zulu community and within South Africa. He quickly elevated himself into the leader of the Zulus through his traditional role as principal advisor to the Zulu tribal king. While we were greatly impressed with his objectives and political skill, we worried that he was not able to work well with other Black South African leaders, particularly those he viewed as eventual political rivals. We often had to encourage him to cooperate more closely with other such leaders. We often ended up brokering between Zulu and Xhosa to get them to work together on issues of common concern. We were concerned by the inter-tribal tensions and fighting that took place, often exacerbated by the South African government. We had enormous respect for Buthelezi as a tactician. He knew how to hold to what he wanted and how to get it. Unlike the leaders of the ANC, he chose to work from within the apartheid and Bantustan system, playing on its weaknesses and flaws, and demonstrating its absurdities. He would tell the South African government, for example, that, "If you're going to create a Kwazulu nation, then you have to give us what is needed for a Kwazulu nation - the political power, the economic power, the economic resources, and the land that belongs to the Kwazulu nation - that is, all of Natal." He played the South African government. They thought he was someone they could deal with and manipulate to their own ends. That gave him a status and some limited power he might not otherwise have had in dealing with them. He played his cards very skillfully and in the end, helped to undermine the government's Bantustan policy. He was a brilliant man for that. He knew how to work with us, with the white community, and how to be a very traditional leader within the Kwazulu nation.

Q: How did we view the role of the ANC, and the ANC people who were mostly out of the country at that time? Was Mandela a name when you were there?

COMRAS: The ANC remained very active in South Africa, although it had gone underground. The ANC retained a substantial following. It retained great respect from among the Black South Africans of all tribes. Mandela was a hero to Black South Africans everywhere.

I remember one major incident related to Mandela, when I was there. Mandela was then imprisoned on Robin Island, near Cape town. Our ambassador at the time was John Hurd, a Texan, and Nixon. He had become friendly with South Africa's Justice Minister, and was invited to go hunting with him on Robin Island where Mandela was incarcerated. That hunting trip caused quite a stir back in the United States, and the ambassador was nearly recalled because of it. I think it was a good reminder that none of us should get too comfortable in apartheid South Africa, least we forget our values, and the important role we were assigned in encouraging and pushing for change there..

Q: Helen Suzman was a political figure of some importance.



COMRAS: Yes, Helen was a member of a small English liberal party that remained steadfast in its opposition to apartheid. She gained prominence as one of its very few elected to Parliament. The principal English party was the United Party. It was the principal opposition party to the Afrikaans controlled National party. The English community had a larger party called the United Party. The National party had sufficient votes by itself to dominate the parliament. When Apartheid began to crumble the United Party proved incapable of any real leadership and began to fade away as a political force in South Africa. More and more members of the English liberal community looked to the Liberal Party, and the Afrikaans party also developed its own liberal wing.

Q: Did Helen Suzman make a point of working with us?

COMRAS: Yes, but she was not located in Durban. Our posts in Pretoria and Cape town maintained close relations with her.

Q: Were we more active in this than the French, Germans, and British? Did they have consulates there?

COMRAS: Yes. They were not at all as active as we were. They had a more traditional attitude of non interference in the internal affairs of South Africa. The British and Germans were often interested in what we were doing, but rarely hosted any multiracial events on their own. They would come to our events, but they never really emulated us. The British were the first to change, and follow our lead. The others did so only much later.

Q: Was it just that these were traditional people not wanting to make waves?

COMRAS: There were 2 tendencies. One was the traditional diplomatic tendency of not involving yourself in the internal affairs of the country. That became a major issue for a number of countries who felt that they were putting themselves on a slippery slope if they got into this, that it would put them in an untenable position in looking after their country's interest in South Africa. Many of them did have much more important investment than the U.S. did in South Africa. Some were just traditional diplomats and didn't want to engage in internal affairs issues. Many benefitted from apartheid and were very comfortable with it. A lot of these people remember their experiences elsewhere in Africa during the colonial period and felt right at home in 1970s South Africa.

Q: Were your consular colleagues saying, "Why don't you guys quiet up and play the game?"



COMRAS: We got some of that. And there was even some initial reluctance on the part of some of our consular colleagues to attend our multiracial functions. But once they saw that South African government officials were attending, they started to show more interest. They saw that our policies were allowing us to expand our contact base rather than diminish it. So, even the most reluctant slowly began joining in.

This was a time also when constituents in the United States were beginning to put a lot of pressure on American companies invested in South Africa. There was pressure on many to cut their business activities and to withdraw their investments. Some of the larger American companies in South Africa began to review their investments and policies here. General Motors was among that group. They owned a few facilities in South Africa, including an automobile assembly plant. Their management came to South Africa to take a look. They wanted to meet with members of all of South Africa's communities, including Blacks. For them, it was not just a simple issue of whether or not to pull out. It became a question of, should we stay in and argue that we're giving people jobs, employment opportunity, and open ourselves up more to the black community and through that lead the way to an economic labor change in these countries or should we pull out? This debate gave way to a number of studies and documents and to a process known as the Sullivan Principles. This involved the establishment of practices that would mirror our policy of constructive engagement. Those that adhered to the Sullivan principles would institute labor practices consistent with American values and policies, and would work for constructive change in South Africa. They would become constructive advocates for change in South Africa through empowering their non White labor force economically and in the workplace. Apartheid would be left off at the front gate.

One of the first American business leaders to come to South Africa to judge for himself was General Motors chairman, R. C. Gerstenberg.

Gerstenberg was very desirous of hosting a major reception in South Africa to which members of various racial groups would be invited. His advance team quickly found out, however, that this would be very difficult to arrange. None of the public facilities were available for this sort of entertaining, and they were told that such entertaining at a public facility would violate South African laws. For reasons unclear, our embassy in Pretoria declined hosting a major multiracial function on their behalf. But the embassy was open to suggesting that they look to the Consulate in Durban to help them with such an event.



I was the acting Principal Officer in Durban at that time. I was very pleased to work with the GM people to arrange such a gathering. We agreed it would be held at the then vacant Consul General's residence. Gerstenberg's people insisted that the gathering be "first class" in every sense. We agreed that the best way to accomplish this would be to put my wife, Sara in charge of the details. They gave her carte blanche to put together a reception that every one would remember. She worked so very hard designing, catering, and adding her own homemade specialties for the occasion. After the event, Gerstenberg wrote a wonderful letter to Sara expressing his deep gratitude for the work and effort she had undertaken on their behalf. He called it the "finest" reception he had ever attended in his whole career."

General Motors got what they wanted. A major social occasion where South Africans of all backgrounds could mix freely, where the conversation was informative and the contacts established proved fruitful for follow-up. I believe this event helped design General Motors future policies in South Africa and helped convince them to commit themselves to the Sullivan principles.

Q: What were you and your colleagues telling the General Motors people and others? This later became part of your real life, sanctions and all that. Were you subscribing to the Sullivan Principles? Did you think this was the way to go?

COMRAS: I often questioned whether the policy of engagement was the correct one. In my view we needed to establish a balance between engagement and sanctions. Constructive Engagement could have positive effects if joined with a stick in the other hand - the stick being the application or the threat of application of non military coercive measures such as diplomatic, political and cultural isolation and measures economic sanctions. We had to South Africa under enormous pressure for constructive engagement to serve as more than an excuse for business as usual. I believed that the route for South African blacks to achieve a peaceful ending of apartheid was going to be very similar to the route chosen by the American blacks in the South - that is, through various kinds of pressure simultaneously. The most important was going to be their growing economic leverage. They didn't have the ballot box, but they had the ballot of the South African Rand. They had the ability to organize and withhold their labor. They could organize themselves to use their economic power and clout in a country that sought to be modern and needed its own internal economy to grow. They represented South Africa's largest potential market and source of labor. And as demand for skilled labor increased, there leverage increased. But this internal power needed to be supplemented by outside pressure. Constructive engagement against this background could provide the economic growth, opportunity and training that inevitably would bring the Black Africans into the mainstream of South Africa's economy. They were the needed labor force for a country that needed to take in more trained labor if South Africa was going to grow economically and retain its competitive place in this world. And white South Africans very much wanted to retain their place in the world economy. These were the opportunities that the South African blacks had to grasp into.



So, with these factors in mind, the role for American companies was to join with these other forces, to help train the Black labor force, and to show the South African Whites just what could be done. I was a supporter of the Sullivan Principles, but joined with coercive measures to make sure that the South African continue to feel the pressure for change.

Q: Did you find the business community in the Durban area seeing things as businesspeople or were they seeing things in terms of black-white?

COMRAS: When it came to social and political issues, the business community was no different from the rest of white South Africa. They saw things very much in terms of black and white. Many of them had witnessed what had happened in the rest of Africa. Many of them in Durban had taken in large numbers of expatriate white immigrants who came out of the independent countries in black Africa, from Rhodesia, from Kenya, etc. They were scared of the blacks. They knew that the blacks outnumber them significantly. Many feared there would be a day of reckoning.

They would often say to me, "It's easy for you Americans to talk about integration and empowering your black population because even in the South they're going to be a minority. But here they're the overwhelming majority." This fear was real.

Nevertheless, South Africa's business community had strong ties to the rest of the world. They wanted to be able to travel freely and do business internationally. They were scared by sanctions and talk of disinvestment. They did not want South Africa to be a rogue State. They did not want to be isolated from the rest of the world.

A majority of the white businesspeople that I dealt with recognized that there was a moral issue, a moral problem with apartheid. Many also recognized that for South Africa to prosper it had to take advantage of its own market, resources and potential. They were worried about the future they would present to their kids. Many recognized that they had to increasingly bring the blacks into the labor market and to develop their potential as consumers. They recognized that by pushing them into Bantustans, and keeping them out of the labor and consumer market, they would condemn South Africa to a poor agrarian economy that offered little future for their kids. This would lead to increased emigration overseas.

The more liberal business people - supporters of Helen Suzman and the Liberal Party believed that the State should begin to devote increasing resources to, "make the blacks more like the whites." This meant education, training and granting political rights to allow them to integrate in an orderly manner into the mainstream of the country.



On the other hand, they recognized that if they did those things, they were dooming the apartheid system for sure. And they knew that increased expectations among the blacks could threaten their way of life. This was their dilemma. The Afrikaner response was, "Let's hold the line. Throw them into the Bantustan, keep them African. Don't give them education. Teach them in their native tongue, Preserve South Africa for the whites."

It's ironic that many of the Africans also pressed for education in their native tribal tongue. The notion of nationalism is often tied up with preserving language and culture. The National party played heavily on this notion. It served their own interests. But the situation posed in South Africa argued for a higher priority being given to pressing for cultural and language integration rather than tribal language preservation. For the Black South Africa to gain political and economic clout, he had to be proficient in English and Afrikaans. If the Black South Africa's were educated only in their own tribal language they would be foreclosed from joining in the prosperity of South Africa.

Q: Did the officers at the consulate find themselves in this type of discussion again and again?

COMRAS: Oh, yes. It was something that we often talked about, especially the younger officers. There was strong pressure in the United States to move forward. Most of us who were posted in South Africa were committed to constructive engagement as the right course of action, but willing to keep possible sanctions as a lever.

Q: Did you have much dealing with the South African government?

COMRAS: On the regional level, yes.

Q: Were these for the most part Afrikaners?

COMRAS: Most of the local government officials in Natal were of English origin. There were some Afrikaners, but Natal was predominantly British.

Q: Were they carryovers from the old colonial days?

COMRAS: Yes, many of them were carryovers. Many of them were more recent immigrants to South Africa and therefore less necessarily committed to the old apartheid system than some of those who had lived in it since the '40s.



Q: Was home in that area considered England more or less?

COMRAS: Yes. The English South Africans were very patriotic towards Britain. They were still very tied to British Royalty. The Queen's birthday was a major event in Natal. They were culturally very much attuned to a Britain - but Britain of the 1940s and 1950s.

Q: We had for the most part political ambassadors in Pretoria/Cape town. Did you get the feeling there was much direction there or was this really sort of Washington driven?

COMRAS: Washington was the epicenter for the development of our relations with South Africa. Of course, the embassy, and our various consulates contributed to this process. However, our policies toward South Africa were driven, in large part, by a U.S. domestic agenda. This was tempered somewhat by the seasoned Africa hands that staffed our senior positions in the State Department Africa Bureau and at our embassy and consulates. These were people who knew Africa. One should note, that the Foreign Service was organized at that time largely in a Bureau-serving mode. This was before open assignments. Most Foreign Service Officers spent the vast majority of their career in the same bureau. If you served in South Africa, you'd probably also served in Nigeria or in Congo or other African states before getting there. So, these people, and some of the best of these people, ended up in the DCM and the political and economic leadership roles of our posts. I think that they did a remarkable job in advancing our policies and empowering Washington and the Department of State to know how to best deal with the conflicting pressures that it was getting from the domestic agenda. You wouldn't find many pro-apartheid people in our embassy! Most of them had served in, and they knew Africa.

Q: By '74, you must have begun to feel pretty much like an African hand.

COMRAS: I certainly did.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about in Durban?

COMRAS: One other little anecdote. There was a puzzling event that occurred in late 1973 or 1974. A scientific ship chartered by the U.S. government - The Glomar Explorer pulled into Durban harbor. We received instructions to facilitate its visit and to sign off the entire crew. A new crew would be signed on in a few days. This was only time this had happened during my stay in Durban. It is rare to sign off an entire crew in a foreign port.



The Glomar Explorer was a particularly interesting ship. It was engaged in a worldwide ocean exploration project. Before signing off the crew, we were invited aboard the ship and given a tour. It was an interesting event and a change from our routine. It took our whole weekend. We were puzzled as to why they would choose to do this in Durban. Only many years later did we read about the reported use of the Glomar Explorer to search for, and possibly retrieve a Russian submarine that sunk in the Indian Ocean. I can only wonder if this was the reason that we signed on a whole new crew in Durban.

Q: In '74, whither?

COMRAS: In '74, I received notice that I was being assigned as the Deputy Protocol Officer for the upcoming Spokane International Exposition. I was not that happy about that assignment. I didn't know if it meant the African Bureau was trying to get rid of me or something else was at play. It did not seem to be a mainstream assignment, nor did I really want to go to Spokane or to be a protocol officer for an international fair.

I came to the States on Home Leave determined to see what I could do to break this assignment. While visiting Boston, I met with some of my old acquaintances at the Harvard Law School I had made while at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. At that time I had worked with them on a contract dealing with Chinese Attitudes toward International law. During that visit I learned about the International Legal Studies Program and put myself in the running for acceptance into the program. I didn't know if I would stay with the State Department or not. However, I was able to get an agreement from the State Department that I could take a leave of absence to attend the program. And the Department agreed to pay me a small amount out of its training funds for this program.

So, the assignment was broken and I was allowed to enroll in the program. I spent a great year at Harvard law school earning an LLM degree in International Law. It was a great experience for me. Many of my professors were the top in their field. One of them, by thesis sponsor, was R.R. Baxter, who'd later served as the American Justice on the International Court of Justice. Another was Louis Sohn, our national expert on UN Law and one those deeply involved in its creation. I later had the opportunity to work closely with him on the dispute settlement provisions of the International Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Q: What was the course like?



COMRAS: I concentrated in the areas of general international law and international trade law. This included courses in international business law, international tax law, conflict of laws, international trade, international transactions, and general international law, including UN law. I was pretty much free to choose my own courses, and to audit course of interest to me. It was a very enriching year for me. I wrote my thesis on the partition of states in international law. It deal with a broad range of issues including self determination, territorial integrity, secession, state responsibility, and state succession. It gave me a greater understanding of a number of the problems that we had faced during the 20th century from the post-World War I partitions to the partitions in India and Pakistan and the Middle East and elsewhere.

Q: Did you get any feel from Harvard for the academic world towards government at that time? Watergate was ending. It was a turbulent period.

COMRAS: I might say that there was still a very close association between Harvard and the U.S. government. One of my professors was Abraham Chayes had served as legal advisor to the State Department during the Kennedy Administration. He was the one who wrote the famous legal memo justifying our Quarantine of Cuba during the missile crisis.

If I can skip forward for a moment, this was a period of time when the Department of State had a number of advisory boards and committees where academia participated in the discussion and formulation of our foreign policy. I compare that to, if I can fast forward to 1996, when I was assigned as diplomat in residence to the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public International Affairs. In the '96 timeframe one of the things that troubled me was the distance that had developed between the government and academia during the intervening years. The historic connection between the two had been lost - to the detriment of both groups. There is now a well of resentful and distrust which separates the two institutions. Its time we did something about it.

One of the first things that I did when I got back to the Department from the University of Pittsburgh was to write a memorandum on this issue to the Director General. I told him of my concern and what I thought needed to be done. I suggested that we make building bridges to Academia part of our new public diplomacy strategy. Unfortunately, little has been done since I wrote that memo. I think the relationship between the State Department and Academia has deteriorated further. This is one of the major problems we have today. We are depriving ourselves of support from one of the most important constituencies we have. There is a great resource out there. If we're going to have a constituency in the U.S. to support the foreign policy of the United States, to be engaged, to convince Congress and the American people that we need an active, well resourced foreign policy, we have to bring the Universities along. We've done everything over the last 10 years we can to alienate them. It's time to build those bridges again.



Q: What were you planning to do with this period of study?

COMRAS: I didn't know for sure. This was a leave of absence. The State Department was not paying my salary. Their investment in my courses was minor. I was looking at all my options. I used this period to benefit my understanding of international law and international trade and to develop options for myself. I believe that I benefitted greatly from that year at Harvard. I was able to use the skills I developed during that period to enhance my own contribution to U.S. policy formulation and implementation. It made me a lot better Foreign Service Officer.

Q: They were also paying your salary?

COMRAS: No. But they had invested a certain amount of money in the cost of the courses I was taking. I had the option of leaving. I did think very seriously about leaving the Department of State. I went so far as to interview with a number of law firms in New York and with IBM and with others and I received some interesting job offers.

This was a time also of changes in the Department of State and in our personnel system. Two things happened that helped convince me to stay in the Department and not accept f those offers. One was that I got promoted. That always helps.

Q: To what rank?

COMRAS: From a 6 to a 5. I was now off mid-career probation. The second was that they were assigning me to Paris. That sounded good too. So, after considerable late into the night discussion with my wife, we decided to take the Paris assignment and stay with the State Department. So we went off to Paris. I was assigned as the U.S. DeputDelegate to COCOM. In fact, I served as the principal Delegate for a good portion of my assignment there. I used that assignment to learn all I could about strategic trade controls, and became an expert in the field. That proved very important to me during the rest of my career with the State Department.

Q: You went to Paris in '75?

COMRAS: Yes.

Q: And you were there until when?



COMRAS: Until 1978. Yes. But, the assignment also disappeared before I got there. Just at the last minute, I received a call from my personnel counselor. He told me that he was going to change my assignment to Beirut. "Vic, we've got a great new opportunity for you in Beirut," he said, "This is a great job. It's above your grade, but you'd be good for it. We want to send you as economic counselor to Beirut." At first I liked the idea. But my wife told me. "You go to Beirut on your own."

Q: Was that before Beirut exploded?

COMRAS: Yes, Beirut appeared to be a great place at that time. Fortunately, I was able to get my personal counselor to hold on to the Paris Assignment for me. Beirut blew up just after we arrived in Paris.

Q: So you were working with COCOM. Could you explain what COCOM was and how you fit in?

COMRAS: COCOM was established in 1948 right around the same time as NATO. After the war there was a burst in creating new post war institutions to reflect the new situation resulting from the aftermath of World War II. The creation of the UN, the post war recovery organizations, the administration of Germany and Japan, and the rise of the communist security threat gave new imperatives for new international institutional frameworks. One such resulting organization - or better arrangement, that resulted was a very secretive Consultative Group that had the objective of depriving the Soviet Union of strategic materials that the Soviet Union could use to expand its military industrial support base and the strength of its armed forces. It was directed at reducing the threat posed by the Soviet Union in the post war period. It sought to develop a limited, but highly coordinated, strategic embargo against the Soviet Union. This would include military equipment, but also critical raw materials, commodities, technology and equipment that might strengthen its military industrial capacity.

The Consultative Group was to serve as a mechanism to coordinate and hold the line among different countries that were in a position to trade with the Soviet Union. Its consultations were very secret. Its controls were very secret and very little information was made public at the time. But this is now all history in the public domain.



The Consultative Committee was initially composed of ministerial level representatives from its member countries. It met in Paris (NATO was located in France at the time) and it fell to the French Government to chair the group. The Group laid down policies to be followed. The work was actually carried out by different coordinating committees. They drew up a list of strategic technology, commodities, and equipment that would not be provided to the Soviet Union or its newly communist dominated satellite states unless all the members of the Consultative Group agreed. The targeted countries included the Soviet Union, the Warsaw pact countries, China and North Korea.

While the embargo agreement was a voluntary one, it reflected the great leverage the United States had over its NATO partners, including the French, at that time. The arrangement literally gave the United States a veto over the export of any of the listed commodities or items. Of course, each country was free to disregard the decisions of the Consultative Group if it felt inclined. But, there was considerable political and economic pressure on them not to do so. This was particularly the case as the United States was providing critical economic and military support to Western Europe at that time. And one must also recall that there was universal concern in Western Europe with the threat posed by the Soviet Union.

The initial members of the Consultative group were the same members as NATO. Its membership grew to include West Germany and Japan. During the period I served in COCOM it had 15 members - all the NATO countries, minus Iceland, plus Japan. It grew subsequently to include South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

When De Gaulle took over in France and expelled NATO, it also refused to name a new chairman for the Consultative Group. However, it did not go so far as to expel COCOM, which, after all, was an informal arrangement which continued to be critical to France for both strategic and economic reasons. Since a Chairman was required to call for meetings of the Consultative Group, the work devolved to the various Coordinating Committees. Since they operated so similarly, in time they were merged into one coordinating committee that became known as COCOM for short.

COCOM had its headquarters in Paris on le Rue de Boite "between a hairdresser and a bank". At least that is how it was subsequently described in an article in Time Magazine. It had a small permanent secretariat. Delegates from the member countries were posted with their bilateral embassies in Paris (or with their missions to the OECD as was the case for the United States). The delegates met twice a week to review matters pertaining to the list and to review requests for export exceptions to the list.

The embargo lists evolved over time. Most raw commodities were removed, and in time, the COCOM lists focused principally on arms, military equipment, nuclear items, and dual use equipment and technology deemed strategic. In the beginning, there were very few requests for exceptions but as time grew there were more and more exceptions.



One of the main ideas behind COCOM, was to create a relatively free trade between the countries of the Western alliance including trade in certain military and nuclear items, and dual use equipment and technology. The United States, for example, would have been reticent to provide western Europe and Japan with access to much of our advanced technology if we could not have been assured that the technology would not slip through such countries to the Soviet Union. COCOM permitted us to draw a strategic trade fence around the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact, rather than on our own borders. Other non-NATO countries could join this open area if they agreed to provide the same controls that COCOM countries provided.

By the 1970s, COCOM had become a specialized group charged with maintaining and reviewing the control lists, keeping the lists up-to-date as technology evolved, and as a clearing house to air and decide on exceptions to the list. The number of exceptions grew to the thousands per year. Each of these was reviewed on a case by case basis. The delegations would present the information in the case exceptions or against the exceptions sought by others in regular discussions. That was the role of our COCOM delegation.

Q: How would you treat Sweden, for example, which later became a problem? They want a fancy milling thing that's good for making submarine propellers but they could use it for... Could you look at what a country was ordering...

COMRAS: While COCOM itself did not limit sales to non designated countries (i.e., the communist countries) the COCOM member countries understood that they would have to closely review and restrict trade in sensitive commodities to third countries, where there was a risk that the item or technology would be reexported to a COCOM designated country. Each COCOM member had its own export control regulations that addressed these issues. COCOM held discussions from time to time on the need to harmonize these regulations and assure they were adequate to prevent leakage of strategic items to the Soviet Union and its allies. This did encumber trade with a number of third countries and led to special arrangements being made with such third countries to safeguard transferred equipment and technology. Countries like Sweden, Switzerland, and Finland found that they had to negotiate bilateral arrangements that gave full effect to the same COCOM restrictions as COCOM countries. Subsequently, in the early 1980s, under the Reagan Administration a special effort was made to reenforce these bilateral arrangements. That became known as the COCOM Third Country Initiative. I played a major role in designing and implementing this strategy.

If Sweden, wanted to sell anything that involved U.S. technology or any NATO country technology to the Soviet Union, it was obliged itself in the contract of sales to first clear the reexport with COCOM.



I recall one incident that demonstrated both the vulnerabilities and the seriousness of these issues. It involved a request by Sweden to reexport to the Soviet Union a sophisticated Air Traffic Control system for use at the Moscow Airport. The export was to be handled by the Swedish company Datasaab. It was a very controversial request as the equipment was quite sensitive to air defense. But, international air traffic safety also had to be taken into account. Much of the equipment and technology involved was of U.S. origin. COCOM debated that request for almost a year. Finally, a compromise was reached and the sale was approved subject to a number of conditions which were insisted upon by the United States. This involved reconfiguring the air traffic control system to eliminate a number of features which had particular application in Air Defense. Special responsibilities were also placed on Datasaab to carry out close verification and inspection procedures to insure the civilian use of the equipment. There was also a limitation on source software and other spare parts. Sweden agreed to the conditions and the export went ahead.

Subsequently we learned that Datasaab had failed to abide by the conditions that were imposed by the United States and COCOM. They provided the Soviet Union with an air traffic control system that retained the capabilities we had required DataSaab to eliminate from the system. This transaction turned out to be a something of a national security disaster for us.

This information only came to light after DataSaab had gone bankrupt and had been acquired by the much larger Swedish company, Eriksson. The Datasaab case developed into a major scandal in Sweden and a major issue in Swedish American relations.

We eventually got full cooperation from the company officials and the Swedish government to piece together what happened, and what features were actually passed to the Soviet Union. This enabled us to better assess the actual damage done and to take the necessary counter-measures.

Q: When you arrived there, where did this thing fit? Were you a world unto yourselves?

COMRAS: The U.S. COCOM delegation was located in an embassy annex building. But, our office was officially part of the U.S. mission to the OECD. I guess it meant that we really independent from both missions. Our small 5 person office was a world apart. We did our work separately from the embassy and the OECD mission. Much of our work dealt with the reproduction and forwarding of materials related to COCOM. We were responsible for the preparation and submission of U.S. exception requests, and for forwarding the exception requests of other countries to Washington for expert consideration. The two officers were charged with dealing with the substantive issues in the organization.



COCOM was located in an embassy annex building which, as I mentioned before, was located between a bank and a hairdresser. Some of the delegates were full-time just handling COCOM. Some of the delegations had other functions in their embassies besides COCOM. But for the U.S. it was a full-time assignment.

Q: Was there a COCOM building?

COMRAS: No, COCOM had a suite of offices in a U.S. embassy annex - it had almost a whole floor in the Annex Building.Q: And that was it for the whole organization?

COMRAS: Yes.

Q: Which was multinational.

COMRAS: That's right. It had a multinational secretariat staff. But each person on the secretariat staff was on loan, or was otherwise paid out of funds coming from the various missions participating in COCOM. A formula had been worked out to share these expenses. For example, Italy provided the chairman of the COCOM and the Italian government paid his, and his secretary's salary. They also paid the cost of maintaining them in Paris.

Q: How did this group work together?

COMRAS: Very good. We all became very close friends and colleagues. Our sessions were very gentle and very friendly, although we could have our barbs. It was a good working environment and a good team. There were two kinds of meetings. Most of the regular meetings were at the delegation level. These were held on a regular basis and handle the day to day issues. But, special meetings were also held with higher level officials and/or experts from capitals to discuss policy or technical issues.

Q: I would think that, here you're trying to figure out how to stop the Soviets from gaining technical advantages, but what the hell would you know about this?



COMRAS: Most of our work was based on either general or specific instructions from Washington. But, the delegations themselves were quite adept at filling in the gaps in these instructions. We also dealt with the nuances, the advocacy, and the general diplomatic side of how to insure our instructions were well presented, respected and accepted or rejected. We also provided a very important channel back to Washington regarding the attitudes expressed by others. Of course, our work was also supplemented by direct approaches in Capitals on critical or controversial issues. We often generated such activities when we felt such interventions were necessary. We were the experts at working the system.

Q: I would think you would find yourself playing the traditional role where the Department of Defense doesn't want to let anything get out at all. The Department of Commerce says, "Hey, these are sales" and is pushing for that. The State Department is kind of in between.

COMRAS: That was just about the way it was.

Q: Then for Germany, I imagine that their salespeople were stronger than their defense people. And the French the same way.

COMRAS: With strategic trade controls there is a built in tension between commercial and national security interests. This tension is compounded by the factor of multiple sources and international competition. The Soviet Union and its allies were very adept at playing off one source with another. And not all the COCOM countries evaluated the national security costs or risks the same way that we did. After all, the United States footed the largest bill for the common defense. So there was always a lot of tension, and some intrigue, associated with each exception request. And this game was not always played just in COCOM. Not everything would happen in COCOM itself. A lot was happening around us, through bilateral channels government to government, embassy to embassy. A French company that wanted to sell something used its own representatives and employed its own lobbyists to get the necessary approvals through the Commerce Department and the Defense Department. The French government used its own bilateral channels to push the USG to approve their exception in COCOM. Still, since we at COCOM knew the system best, and how it worked, we were often very valuable players for everybody in this process. Some of our colleagues in COCOM limited their role to only delivering their instructions and reporting back on the outcome. Others, like the U.S. Delegation were very active players. I was very much engaged in the COCOM process. I developed very valuable knowledge and experience concerning the COCOM process, and I was able to bring that skill back with me to Washington. It served me particularly well in subsequent years when I took over the responsibilities for Strategic Trade issues and COCOM in the Office of East West Trade.



Q: We'll stop at this point.

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Today is April 23, 2002. '75-'78. We've talked about COCOM in general. Let's get specific. What were some of the issues that stick in your mind?

COMRAS: I arrived at COCOM in 1975, at the height of the U.S.-Soviet Union period of détente. I recall that many of my colleagues in State were beginning to believe that COCOM should be dropped or at least modified. In fact, some thought that COCOM had already been dropped altogether. Some of my colleagues were surprised when I told them that I was going to COCOM, and that it still played a major role in East-West Trade. Trade relations with the Soviet Union had increased significantly through the 1970s. More and more exceptions were being granted in COCOM. Refusals were becoming increasingly rare. There was also increasing pressure to liberalize the COCOM lists themselves. The list had been amended several times since the adoption of an almost total embargo of the early 1950s. Since the United States was by far the most advanced in high technology and since the way COCOM worked, we had a veto on any changes to the list, any shortening of the list - removal of technology and equipment from the list - was subject to our veto. We also had a veto on any exceptions from the list. We held a very powerful seat in COCOM.

We had technology that other countries wanted and we had the ability to stop them from selling items and technology to the East at least openly. Every COCOM member government was always free to do what it wanted. Some violated COCOM openly, some covertly. But those occasions were relatively rare. There were times when countries completely disregarded COCOM. This included the United States. Some of our first trade with China was conducted without reference to COCOM. But, for the most part, COCOM played a major role in coordinating strategic trade and strategic trade policies within the Atlantic Alliance. It played a major role in permitting the West to preserve and increase its technological lead over the Soviet Union, and to win the arms race. It made it significantly more difficult and expensive for the Soviet Union to compete with the West economically and militarily. COCOM certainly played its part in helping us win the arms race. It also played an important role in the downfall of the communist system in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact.

Q: Were there sometimes issues that would come up and we would say, "Let's not even raise that because it doesn't make sense. If we raise it, then we have to take action?"



COMRAS: Right. There was an understanding that certain things would be talked about bilaterally among the countries that were most interested. Not everything was vetted iCOCOM. But that was still the exception rather than the rule. Many believed that the U.S. used its leverage in COCOM to apply its own strategic export controls extra-territorially. The other countries generally looked to the U.S. to lead in policy. If the U.S. had no problem with an export, they shouldn't have a problem. However, there was a suspicion that the U.S. might also be using COCOM to gain trade advantage. For example, the U.S. might be the first to approve a large strategic export to a Communist Country. The Warsaw pact countries also might have believed that if the export was to be made by an American firm, the U.S. government would be under greater pressure to approve the export they would be if the export was to be made by a company in another COCOM adhering country. On the other hand, applying for an export from another country might also serve to place greater pressure on the U.S. to grant the license.Q: And also we were the schoolteacher, making people stick by the rules more or less. If we weren't doing it, nobody else would do it.

COMRAS: That's right. But that was kind of a snapshot of the situation. The pressure for liberalization was always there from our business community, from our  $d\ddot{u}$ ntente impulses, and from our new openings to China. So, while I was in COCOM I witnessed a growing more liberal, favorable attitude towards exceptions to the COCOM lists.

However, I should tell you that back home in Washington there were many conservatives and others that were beginning to believe that we were giving away the store. This was certainly the case in the Pentagon. There was growing criticism and concern that perhaps we were liberalizing our strategic trade restrictions too quickly. And there was increasing intelligence and other information that the Soviet Union was becoming increasingly adept at circumventing the COCOM controls in place - that they were getting their hands on some very advanced western technology. I began to see growing pressure from the Defense Department to hold back this liberalizing trend. As I said the number of exceptions began to grow exponentially. This gave rise to increased calls from the other COCOM countries for a reduction in the Lists and the establishment of new mechanisms to streamline the exception approval process. The more exceptions that were requested, the longer the backlog of exception cases grew, and the longer it seemed to take to get any exception request through the national and COCOM review process. Companies, and subsequently countries, began to complain loudly in Washington that the COCOM process was inhibiting their legitimate business and trade interests. This in turn gave rise to increased rivalry and jockeying for position vis a vis potential Warsaw pact clients. There were also suspicions that the U.S. would delay other country cases while pushing ahead on its own.

Q: What do you mean by "delay?"



COMRAS: When an exception request was presented, it was referred back to capitals for full analysis. Although COCOM rules provided a specific timetable, it was easy to get extensions of time to review cases. If the U.S. felt overly pressed for a response, it would simply object to the export, pending further review. When exception requests were sent back to Washington, they would be circulated around the various interested agencies. This usually included the Commerce Department, the Defense Department, CIA and State. Some cases would also involve the Department of Energy, the NRC and perhaps even NASA. All the agencies had to agree. Often, they disagreed, and that entailed further delay to work out their differences. Sometimes this took 10 to 12 months or more. Some cases had to go to the White House for final resolution. In the early stages of COCOM, cases could generally be disposed of quickly. The agencies would quickly say "No" and the export was stopped unless the Defense Department really wasn't worried about it. But, during détente, a Defense Department "no" was often challenged by the Commerce or State Department. So the delay factor became a growing problem within COCOM during my tenure there. Delay also became a growing irritant in our relations with other countries. The result was increasing pressure to liberalize and shorten the COCOM lists.

Q: I would imagine that another factor would be that if this was a European outfit that wanted to do something, it would have a lower priority back in Washington.

COMRAS: That often was the case, but sometimes it appeared that way more than the actual fact. The first step in processing an export license request was to have it viewed domestically. Before the U.S. submitted an exception request to COCOM it had already vetted the case at home and decided on approval. So the case would stay in COCOM for a relatively short time before being approved. However, other countries would often just send the case directly to COCOM for review, and then await the U.S. position in COCOM. The case would only get reviewed when in COCOM. They took the view that if the export was ok'ed by the U.S., they should have no objection to it. So, when a U.S. case was going to go to COCOM, it had already been vetted in Washington. COCOM review, could be handled rapidly for the most part. This made it appear that there was little COCOM delay in handling U.S. cases. However, other countries cases in COCOM got held up for months while the case was being reviewed in Washington. This made it look like the U.S. was holding up other cases, while its own were being processed quickly. In fact, both U.S. and non-U.S. exports were subjected to the same, often time consuming review - U.S. cases before they got to COCOM and other cases after they got to COCOM.

There was another factor also at play during my tenure in COCOM. Other countries were beginning to close the technology gap with the United States. They began to compete directly in many areas of high technology. The percentage of U.S. components, or U.S. source technology began to diminish. This weakened U.S. leverage with regard to the exports of such items. This also gave rise to increased pressures to reform the COCOM lists.



The Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact countries began to play on this growing intra Western competition. They looked increasingly to other countries for their purchases, and they favored equipment that did not contain U.S. origin components. This became a costly business for U.S. OEMs. This gave rise to increasing pressure in the U.S. business community, also, for export control and COCOM list reform.

Q: Who were the operative people who would say, "Okay, we've got to do something about this" and do something about it?

COMRAS: Our instructions came from the State Department's Office of East West Trade. But the major players in Washington were the Commerce Office of Export Administration and two offices in the Defense Department - the Office of the Secretary of Defense which dealt with export control policy and another office known to me as DDC&E which looked closely at the technology and its military implications. All of these offices, agreed, for their own purposes with the need to begin to undertake some reform of our Export Control system including the operations of COCOM. But, along comes 1978 and 1979 and the Soviet invasions of Poland and Afghanistan. Defense is put on hold. The U.S. begins to reconsider its relations with the Soviet Union and to review the advances that the Soviet Union has made in its own military technology. Much of this, it happens was either purchased or stolen from the West. The Carter Administration orders a full review of our export control system, including COCOM. Not with the intent of liberalizing, but, rather, to reassess what we should do to preserve our technology advantage and slow down the advance of Soviet armaments.

Q: Yes. Was that comparable to the '68 invasion of Czechoslovakia?

COMRAS: No, I don't think it was quite as dramatic. But, I do think it had major consequences. It changed our whole attitude towards the Soviet Union. It led to the imposition of new sanctions - the grain embargo - it led to a tightening of our export regulations and administration, it suspended further liberalization in COCOM and it helped elect Ronald Reagan. It ushered in a new period of concern with the nuclear and military threat posed by the Soviet Union.



As I mentioned previously, a number of stories began to appear about how the Soviet Union had acquired sensitive high technology from the West. They reported that the Soviet Union had succeeded in circumventing many of the COCOM controls and had gained technology and equipment in areas that we would never have let them have. More and more of these stories came out about the failure of COCOM to adequately control high technology. Blame was placed on a common failure by our allies to provide sufficient monitoring and enforcement over their export controls. There was a significant mood change. Rather than liberalize, there was now pressure to reinvigorate COCOM. The Europeans shared this attitude to a point, but those concerns faded rapidly when the initial shocks wore off. The election of Ronald Reagan reenforced our own desires for a more stringent set of export controls.

One has to also consider that during this period - early '78 through the early '80s, Europe was in an economic recession. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact countries were very tempting markets for European high tech companies that risked going out of business. There was a great loss of jobs in those industries throughout Europe. If they could sell to this new and growing and exciting market to the east, they might be able to stave off closing. So, there was enormous pressure within Europe to liberalize and to sell to the Warsaw Pact countries.

Q: I've noticed this even today dealing with Iraq and other places, that there seems to be almost a game that goes on that the Europeans almost depend on the U.S. to be their conscience and to be the tough guy making them do things where they can almost feel free to try to see what they can get away with and pursue trying to sell things because it means good business and almost depending on the United States to make them be a bit careful about over arming potential enemies.

COMRAS: That's been true for a while. European countries, particularly the smaller ones have either been unable, or unwilling, to devote the same level of resources and expert review to vet each dual use export. It is simply easier to rely on the U.S. However, when it comes to challenging a negative U.S. position, these countries sometimes decided to devote a greater expert effort to respond to U.S. concerns. Their attitude was, "Why should we do this if the Americans are going to do it? Let's just take the piece of paper, we'll look at it, we'll be good guys to our business, we'll grant it, and we don't have to take the political heat for any denials. In any event, we don't have the resources or the personnel to figure out whether this should go or not. We'll ship it over to the Americans and then they're going to study this thing to death anyway. If they've got real problems with it, they're going to kill it. What the hell, let them..."

Q: "And then we can scream and yell and point to our business and say, 'We want to do it, but those damned Americans.'"



COMRAS: Yes. Hiding behind the American skirts became a regular tactic. However, sometimes they wanted to show their independence from the U.S. This was often the case for the French, who often challenged our rationale for denying a French export. They could apply considerable pressure, and sometimes used linkage as a tactic to push their cases through. The Germans, the British and the Italians also took to increasingly challenge U.S. negative positions as time went on. And later on even the Japanese began to express their own independent considerations, political considerations in their own trade relationships, with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Each of these countries increasingly felt - and the Soviet Union played well into this - that this kind of trade had enormous political and foreign policy overtones and that there were many reasons that the Europeans wanted to be able to deal on their own with their own foreign policy interests towards the East. Their relations with Poland were a good example. And the Europeans perhaps quicker than the Americans envisaged a day where Europe might be as the Europeans even began to talk in the mid-'80s, this European home. They wanted to be the first out of the block. If they perceived that eventually the United States was going to liberalize, then they wanted to be at the forefront of such liberalization. They were resentful that we would change our policy and be the first out and then we would be holding them back. Our companies, they feared, would know if we were willing to change or become more liberal before foreign companies knew. This would give our companies, they felt, a commercial advantage. To prevent this they would regularly test the envelope so they could be out in front and as soon as we would change our policy, they'd be in the market before us. This was a period of great computer technological advances. New technology companies were right at the cusp of profitability in a number of countries. These countries were pushing for further technology investments. But they also remained heavily reliant on new U.S. technology. They needed to keep us on board and willing to allow technology transfers to their shores. You add to that several other factors that play into this very complex picture.

At that time COCOM consisted of the NATO countries, minus Iceland plus Japan. But, a number of other countries were beginning to experience new technological advances, and wanted to be able to share in the same relatively open market for technology transfers that the NATO countries were enjoying. They wanted to be in the same circle. This included Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea. Many other countries were also beginning to create and replicate the same technological capabilities that the COCOM countries had.

To some degree, the United States retained through this period a degree of control because it was the source of much of the base technology and equipment needed by these countries. By the early 1980s when I am back in Washington, these factors are all prominent forces that are influencing our strategic export policies.

Q: During this '75-'78 period, Israel was the beneficiary of a lot of our technology. It also was adding its own- (end of tape)



Israel was backing off American technology but adding its own embellishments. They were also playing a game with the Soviets of getting the Soviets to let Jews out and were offering goodies for the Soviets mainly to get Soviet Jews out. Were we looking at Israel as being a leak?

COMRAS: No. During this period Israel was only a marginal player in the high tech area. They became more important later on. Many of the items that were in Israel were subject to the U.S. reexport licensing requirements. In fact, during that period of time, relations were not that favorable with the Soviets. When detente came to a halt in late 1970s, there was no significant trade moving between Israel and the Soviet Union. The aftermath of the '72-'73 Middle East war had cooled relations between Israel and the Soviet Union even further. So, Israel was not viewed as a source of leakage of western technology to the Soviet Union.

However, there was a growing concern during this period with leakage from the emerging high tech markets in Southeast Asia, and in Sweden and Finland. They were all active in the Soviet market at that time. Still the Soviet Union was most interested in gaining access to the most advanced new technologies available only in the United States.

Q: Were we concerned about Americans who were going after the fast buck?

COMRAS: Yes. There were a couple of transactions that stand out during that time.. The most serious issue was a case of the sale of an air traffic control system to the Soviet Union from Sweden.. We had put very significant and severe conditions on what they could sell before we had agreed to it. They accepted those conditions and then ignored them and sold a system that created enormous problems for us later. There were other problems that arose. In the late '70s, there was a major anti-trust lawsuit against IBM which dealt with the issue of the software and the interfaces with what were the mainframe computers where IBM had a near monopoly, if not a monopoly. As part of the settlement of that case, it was agreed that IBM would have to publish its whole series of technology related to its interfaces so that others could make equipment that could be components and peripherals to IBM mainframes and open up the market to other countries. All of a sudden, all this control technology was beginning to appear in textbooks and in other non-classified sources. The Russians move in very quickly to take advantage of this. They used this new publicly available information to design their own interfaces and systems and began to replicate IBM technology. They also did a lot of work on reverse engineering stolen equipment and components. The Soviet Union tried to copy as much Western technology as they could. In fact, their new generation computers were based largely on the published data and interface material and other replicated and reverse engineered components. This is the technology that they were targeting during this whole period of time. The machine tool area and the chip area and the computer technology area were the real big areas of concern. Israel and some other states weren't into that kind of stuff.



Q: How about Taiwan and South Korea? Was there any talk about bringing them into the COCOM circle.

COMRAS: Not in the 1970s. But later in the 1980s. In 1982 when I came back into export control - I was doing Law of the Sea from 1978-1980 - Taiwan and South Korea, along with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia were getting into high tech. This gave rise to a new policy debate in the United States. It also led to the adoption of a new U.S. strategy to broaden out the COCOM cooperating countries circle to include these countries. This became known as the Third Country Initiative, which basically brought these countries into COCOM without their actually sitting at the COCOM table. They agreed to abide by the same strictures as COCOM. This, in turn, led to a new round of COCOM and export control reforms.

Q: Let's move to '78 to '80. What were you doing in that period?

COMRAS: I left COCOM in the summer of 1978 to take up a new position as an attorney advisor on Elliott Richardson's Law of the Sea team. Let me step back a little bit and explain the antecedents to that assignment. I attended Harvard Law School from 1974-1975 before going on to COCOM. One of my professors there was Louis Sohn. Sohn was a renown expert on United Nations Law and International Law and we developed a very good relationship while I was at Harvard. About that time he began to work as a consultant to Elliott Richardson on the Law of the Sea. He was engaged to advise on possible dispute settlement provisions in a future law of the sea treaty. Unbeknownst to me in 1975 when I left Harvard, he wrote to Richardson suggesting that he interview me for a possible role on the U.S. delegation. "This is a good guy" he said, "If need somebody on your Law of the Sea delegation, think of him. In fact, I would love to have him work with me on dispute settlement." But, I moved off to COCOM. In 1978, thinking of my year at Harvard, I was very interested in coming back and working for the Legal Advisors Office (L). L at that point was a very closed shop. They really only wanted the people that they decided upon through their own processes independent from the Foreign Service. In the past, they would take Foreign Service officers. They were not that satisfied with that kind of structure of having the person come in and then leave for another assignment. They were reticent to accept Foreign Service officers. We had some conversations. They were attracted by me for a number of reasons. But it all fell down to one particular issue. They wanted to have me come for an interview with their panel for hiring in Washington, DC. The way the open assignments process worked, that was cumbersome, particularly since the Department of State wouldn't pay for me to go back to Washington for that purpose alone. The Department of State through the open assignments process and its "fairness" requirements, insisted that L take me on without a separate interview. While this was going on someone mentioned to Elliott Richardson that I was looking for a legal assignment in Washington. He indicated that he would be glad to have me. So, to my surprise, they offered me this job on Law of the Sea. I accepted with great pleasure. So I came back to Washington as an attorney advisor not for L but for Elliott Richardson's Law of the Sea delegation.



Q: In 1978 when you arrived there, where stood the Law of the Sea negotiations?

COMRAS: The Law of the Sea negotiations was tedious and slow. The negotiations on the treaty had already been underway for a decade when I joined the process. You may recall that the traditional view was that countries could claim only a three mile territorial limit at sea. This had come from the idea that during the 18th Century that was about as far as a shore battery could fire its guns. However the jurisdiction issues began to change in the 19th century with countries claiming jurisdiction over wider areas. Some 12 miles, and some even claiming their whole continental shelf up to 200 miles out at sea. Then there were problems of overlapping territorial sea claims. Many of these issues had given rise to major international disputes in the late 19th century and into the 20th century. The Law of the Sea treaty sought to deal with these issues, and many more. It was viewed as a new basic law to cover the issues related to the seas which cover 4/5ths of our planet.

About 70% of the treaty was already in place, but the negotiations were bogged down on the difficult issues remaining. When Elliott Richardson took over, he tried to speed things up. But there were some specific issues that really seemed impossible to resolve. They reflected wide differences of view among key countries. Many of these issues were also viewed as critical "make or break" issues for the United States. These included major differences on issues related to jurisdiction over the continental shelves, the possible creation of special economic zones that could extend riparian sovereignty way into the ocean, and access to ocean resources, including seabed nodules which were rich in manganese, nickel and cobalt. Another major issues related to the so called "right of passage" which was so important for the United States. Right of passage was essential for our naval capabilities and ability to move our warships freely at sea. Jurisdiction over the continental shelves or over special economic zones also raised questions regarding the rights of open scientific work and research in these areas.

Another major issue was seabed mining and the whole question of how to allot or share the resources at the bottom of the ocean. This was a very complex issue for a number of reasons. One issue was whether or not seabed resources should be available to anyone on a first come first serve basis, or whether they should be viewed as "the common heritage of mankind," that is, assets to be shared equitably by all countries of the world. The "common heritage of mankind" was a major international theme in the 1970 with relevance to a number of international questions including Antarctica, outer-space and the seabed.



The rest of the world was interested in seabed mining only if it could be a shared resource internationally. They wanted to take the approach that the benefits of this had to be viewed as the common heritage of mankind and available to all states on an equitable basis. If you were going to do that, you had to open up seabed mining either to an international organization consortia that would do it on the basis of the international community at large, a concept which was anathema to us for a number of reasons-

Also at play was the fact that the U.S. military already enjoyed an almost exclusive ability to operate on the deep ocean floor. Our deep-sea marine technology permitted us to do what no other country could do at that time. And with the Cold War well underway, this was a critical advantage we did not want to cede.

All of these factors played into the atmosphere dealing with these issues and made them so difficult to resolve. These were the critical issues that we were about to address as part of Elliott Richardson's negotiating team. I was involved in one way or the other in just about all of them.

Seabed mining occupied most of my time. In particular, I was asked to work on a formula to resolve differences over the ticklish issue of seabed mining related technology transfer. This issue arose in the following way. A great number of countries were unwilling to allow seabed mining to take place if they could not benefit also from these resources. They insisted that some equitable system be established for the allocation of seabed mining sites, and access to these resources. Several countries wanted to establish a special international authority that would handle all such mining on behalf of the international community. However, all this would be meaningless unless these countries, or the international authority possessed the requisite technology to conduct such deep seabed mining. As I noted earlier, only the United States, and a very small handful of other countries had technology useful in that regard. So, this led to great pressure to include in the treaty an obligation on any country undertaking such mining to transfer the needed technology to other approved countries, or to an international authority, if one was created.

You can understand that such requirements would be very controversial and would be resisted by the countries holding such technology. Also, given the strategic importance of deep seabed access, the United States was not about to share such technology with other countries.

Q: Just to put it in context, the basic thing is, we were planting cables and other sensors to locate Soviet submarines. This is what we were using it for.



COMRAS: Pretty much. That and many other similar kinds of technologies. Defense was also concerned just about the noise factor that you would get in seabed mining. There was this number of companies that were pushing very strongly for seabed mining. You had these nodules that were discovered on the ocean floor - magnesium, cobalt, nickel, zinc, and some other smaller trace metals. The most important ingredient in them was nickel. Without the nickel, these would not be viable as a commercial entity. There are a number of states that are nickel exporters. Canada is one of them. And they were not eager to see a whole new source of nickel thrown on the market. The price of nickel was already right where they wanted it to be and they didn't think that new suppliers of nickel would be the way to go. Nickel was a more and more important metal for a number of applications at this period of time. So, those states that possessed land based nickel mines were not also eager to see advances made in the Law of the Sea creating a seabed mining regime.

Q: What precluded the Kennedy-Comras organization from putting its ships out and going to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and picking up nodules?

COMRAS: That's a very good question. And a number U.S. companies who formed a seabed mining consortia were asking the same question. I think the answer lies in the uncertainty surrounding the possible international repercussions or responses. I don't think they would have been any direct interference with there deep seabed activities. But, once the ships got into port, or the company tried to market the nodules, it might find that it faced both legal and other challenges. This would probably include legal challenges to their rights of ownership over the nodules. If a deep seabed mining ship happened to call at a port in Newfoundland, for example, the Canadians might possibly choose to seize the ship, crew and cargo. Perhaps there would be charges filed against those responsible for the deep seabed mining on a theory that they had taken something that didn't belong to them - they had stolen something that many in the world felt was the common heritage of mankind. It's the same thing with the moon. Can somebody go out and do something on the moon privately and take it back? The answers to those questions are probably governed by some of these common heritage of mankind generation treaties that have already been in place. Without a treaty, you have the U.S. government that might let you get away with it, but you really risk what others might do to you around the world. So, given that it wasn't all that exciting, that it was going to be very expensive to get into it, and that the results were going to be unknown in terms of the legal regime, especially if an agreement on the Law of the Sea did come about and it might not cut your way - why do it?

Companies were not really going to make big investments in seabed mining without knowing the answers to these questions.



The seabed mining negotiations did try to tackle many of these questions. A scheme was developed that would provide concessions on an equitable basis to various applicants that qualified under set standards. Some grids would be reserved for a special international authority which could also undertake direct seabed mining activities, if and when they could acquire the technology. There were many attempts at compromise.

Q: It looked like whatever you got out of it had to be divided among all the people in the world or something. After you took out your expenses, it sounds like it's a non-starter.

COMRAS: In the end, it was a very difficult treaty to negotiate. The final treaty provided for a sharing system. But, it was rejected, as you know, by the Reagan Administration. I think we signed it but we failed to ratify it. Richardson left the Law of the Sea just before the 1980 elections. When Reagan came into office in January 1981 the remaining members of the delegation were also dismissed. I had already left that group literally weeks before that happened to take on my responsibilities under Bill Root in the Office of East-West Trade. But that was a brutal moment when the new Reagan administration totally reneged on and disavowed the Law of the Sea Treaty.

Q: What about the right of passage? This was something that has been an international law.



COMRAS: The treaty reflected a good compromise on that issue. The basic issue stemmed from the fact of the continental shelf. A number of states wanted full economic jurisdiction of the resources of their continental shelf and the waters above for fishing rights, for whatever it was. We in the United States have a very significant continental shelf and would like to keep it and they were claiming up to 200 miles out. Now, of concern to us from that, normally we would say, "Yes, let's leave to the riparian state the right of the continental shelf. That would be great for us, all that oil and everything else. But with 2 provisos. We're not going to make these waters jurisdictional waters where we would have to notify and get permission for the passage of warships. Two, scientific research. I'm not sure we didn't have some hidden agendas on the scientific research, but our scientific research people had a very strong lobby and did not want to foreclose themselves from carrying out research on continental shelves of any other countries. So they pushed for an exemption to allow scientific research to take place on its own merit without requiring special permissions, etc., or giving the riparian states a veto over the research. These issues were resolved. Then, there was the third issue of conflicting claims to continental shelves. One of the areas where you had the most difficult problems was between Greece and Turkey. They often disagreed on who owned which little rock island. Their claims seriously overlapped. One might suggest the issue be resolved with a line down the middle. But the problem was that you've got all these little islands off the coast of Turkey that both Greece and Turkey claim. If each one of those became a point from which you would draw out jurisdictional waters, you were creating havoc and enormous competition between Greece and Turkey in an area believed to be extremely wealthy in continental shelf resources, oil and other resources. This issue remained stuck in the broader contention between Greece and Turkey. Many of these issues were pushed back or deferred. But, in the end the United States did not accept the outcome. In any event a lot of the perceived issues of concern have since fallen away. The floor of the price of nickel by the end of the '80s had fallen out and there was no economic interest in seabed nodule mining. The changes in the Cold War, the advances in technology, so many other factors came along to change attitudes and positions. The common heritage of mankind is an issue that seemed to fade away. It doesn't have the same excitement and philosophical attachment of the Third World to it as it did at another point. So, the atmosphere is different. The stakes are different. I'm not sure where things stand now.

Q: It certainly was a good exposure to the disputatious nature of nations. Where did you go in 1980?

COMRAS: In late 1980, I was asked by Bill Root to join him as his section chief to deal with, and handle the strategic export control issues. As I mentioned earlier, COCOM had taken on new importance after the Soviet intervention in Poland and invasion of Afghanistan. The Reagan administration also placed a greater priority on strategic export control and stopping the flow of sensitive dual use technology to the Soviet Union and Warsaw pact countries. Bill was looking for someone who knew the subject well. I had had the COCOM experience and so he recruited me to take over that section.



Q: Was your office in the State Department the official connection to COCOM?

COMRAS: Yes, we were charged with backstopping COCOM and for handling U.S. strategic export control licenses. We were also charged with negotiating new and tighter COCOM controls with our allies, and getting third countries to cooperate with these controls.

Q: You did this for how long?

COMRAS: My assignment to that office lasted for about 2 years.

Q: Having been in COCOM and seeing the backlog that was developing in the States, had there been any improvement in this? COMRAS: This was a period of enormous conflicting pressures on where our policy should go. There was a very strong tendency on the part of the new Reagan administration to tighten down the hatch. On the other hand, there were strong pressures also from within the Reagan Republican business community to allow business to go unfettered wherever possible. It was a pressure cooker kind of job with enormous tension, enormous pressure, and a high profile. This was a very difficult period for Bill Root, and for me.

Q: How did you deal? Were there the Richard Perles or the equivalent thereof, the people who were absolute hardliners on dealing with the Soviet Union and Reagan businessmen who wanted to get the trade? Could you resolve these or did this have to be tossed up?

COMRAS: Before the Reagan period, most COCOM and export control related issues were determined at the Office Director level in State, in Commerce, and in Defense. More senior people didn't want to touch these issues. But, after Reagan's election, senior political appointees began taking a direct interest in export control matters. The level of decision making was pushed upward, particularly in Commerce and in Defense, to the Assistant Secretary level and above. The dynamic in the State Department also changed. There was increasing pressure to transfer strategic trade controls away from the Economic Business Bureau to the Political Military Bureau. This became a major turf fight for several years.



Export Controls also entered into a more prominent part of our relations with our European Allies, so the European Bureau also began to take a much greater interest. We started having some major internal fights in the State Department regarding both policy and turf. Nevertheless, the Assistant Secretaries involved found the issues to be mundane and complex. This worked to my advantage in handling these issues. I was about the only one around in State who understood the technology and the COCOM process. That gave me a strong hand to deal with these issues. I began to have direct access to the Assistant Secretary and Under Secretary Level, every time they had to deal with an export control related issue. My knowledge of the issues gave me some leverage and prominence in dealing with these issues.

When the senior people didn't want to deal with these issues, they would thrust them back on Bill Root and me. We had to write memos for them and churn things out and we'd have to spoon feed them on this. They didn't want to deal with it. So we would get it pushed back on us. Still we had to keep the people upstairs happy. Just when things were getting intolerable, it was time for me to move on. So, I did move on. I became the deputy director of the Office of Energy, Technology Cooperation in 1982. But, in 1983, the roof fell in on Bill Root and he was gone.

Q: He said he reached a point where he just had to go.

COMRAS: Yes. COCOM had become big stuff. By 1983 both Richard Perle in the Defense Department and William Buckley and Richard Burt in the State Department had become involved. And they didn't always agree. Buckley was then Undersecretary for Technology Affairs. Richard Burt was assistant Secretary for European and Canadian Affairs. They were both constantly facing pressure from our allies on COCOM and Strategic Trade related stuff. Particularly after the Reagan Administration sought to clamp down on the construction of a Soviet gas pipeline to Western Europe.

Somebody mentioned my name to them. At the time I was the deputy director of the Office of Energy, Technology Cooperation dealing mostly with alternative energy issues. I remember well the call I received from then Under Secretary William Buckley's office - to come upstairs and brief Buckley and Burt on COCOM.



Let me step back and tell you a little more about the infighting at that time. Export controls were traditionally handled by the Office of East-West Trade in the Economic Business Bureau. With the new administration new players began to take an interest in these matters. Richard Burt was appointed as Director of the Political Military Bureau. He brought in a new political Deputy Assistant Secretary named Stephan Halper. Halper and asked him to look over the strategic export issues. Halper was a political appointee. He had no real background in the strategic trade area, but he quickly recognized the importance and political impact of strategic trade issues. He became a real hardliner on these issues. He immediately set out to take over strategic trade from EB. When he couldn't get the whole thing, he went after pieces. The reason he couldn't get the whole function was opposition from the U.S. business community, and their lobbyists that were not willing to see strategic trade ceded fully to those with just a political military perspective. They wanted someone to still look after the commercial interests.

One of the pieces Halper got was missile related technology. He set in motion a new U.S. initiative to negotiate a new Missile Technology Control regime to augment COCOM controls. He also concentrated on technology related to Weapons of Mass Destruction, including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. They wanted to handle this stuff separate from the regular COCOM computer and basic high technology stuff.

The problem is that Halper's office lacked any real expertise in any of these areas or technology. So he became very dependent on the Defense Department.

In 1982 COCOM began to prepare for a new review of its control lists. The U.S. missile technology and WMD technology initiatives, along with the wrangle over U.S. restrictions on technology for the Soviet gas pipeline made this review a major event and a very contentious matter.

So, I was called up to brief Buckley and Burt on COCOM, and, I guess for them to look at regarding the role I might play on all these issues. Buckley called on me to spearhead the list review effort. He instructed me to work within the new set-up between the EB and PM bureaus, and to act as an advisor to those dealing with missile tech and WMD. Given the bureaucracies of the situation, and my relatively junior rank still, I was to work directly for Buckley from the 7th floor. My assignment as Deputy Director of the Office of Energy, Technology Cooperation was cut short. And for the next year I worked on strategic export controls in a very ambiguous relationship with the bureaus interested in the issues.



As 1993 advanced, competition grew among the different bureaus for which would be the principal bureau for handling strategic export controls. Even the Geographic Bureaus got interested in the issue. This was due, in part to a new initiative - The Third Country Initiative, which involved convincing non Cocom countries with advanced technology to cooperate fully with COCOM controls. The carrot was bringing these countries into a ring of liberal trade in dual use technology items. The stick was cutting them off from such technology if they didn't cooperate. The tactic was to draw a fence around the Soviet Union and be able to trade freely with all these other countries in high tech. The benefit would be to expand our markets, and allow technology to more freely build on itself. This could work if other countries followed our lead on cutting securing this technology from going to the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact or to China, North Korea and Vietnam.

I was upstairs already working on COCOM and was quickly drawn also into this new third country initiative. The most important countries in the new initiative were Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, and Austria. Just about this time Richard Burt moved over to be Assistant Secretary for European Affairs. The European Bureau had recognized slowly - it took Richard Burt to get over there - that this was going to be one of the major issues with our European partners over the next several years the European Bureau was very concerned that this was going to be done outside of their purview by other functional bureaus and they couldn't take that; they didn't want that. But in order to deal with this issue, they needed someone who knew the issues and could deal with them. So, they made me an offer I couldn't refuse. They convinced the Under Secretary that since he no longer needed me for the list review, and didn't really have an office for me up there anyway, there was no reason why I shouldn't go to work for the European Bureau. So I ended up going to work for the European Bureau in a newly created section in their Regional Affairs Office, EUR/RPE. I was to report directly to Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Niles, and work closely with him in negotiating third country initiative agreements with the targeted European countries.

Q: Did you move beyond to Taiwan and Singapore and all?

COMRAS: Not directly, But I served as an advisor to those who were handling these countries. That included the PM bureau as well as the geographic bureau.

Q: You were saying that the Political-Military Bureau took over the non-European countries.

COMRAS: Yes. I did work closely with them as an advisor on the issues and on the technology, but they set up a special office to do this. My home base was the European Bureau. But I had become known as the expert in the Department of State on these issues. So, I often supported other activities besides the European Office.



Q: How did you find this worked within the Foreign Service Department of State context when all of a sudden you become sort of indispensable, which sounds great, but at the same time career-wise it means you're not very moveable and all that? Does it create problems?

COMRAS: It put me under great pressures, and had me working very long hours. It also entailed a lot of travel. This is one I did for most of the period from 1980 to 1985. During that period I was stuck in Washington on Export Controls. My career pattern has already varied considerably from the normal foreign service career pattern. It continued to vary for most of the rest of my career also. There were costs, and there were rewards. I think the rewards outweighed the costs.

In 1985, when I was no longer needed for export controls, the European Bureau choose me to serve as Consul General in Strasbourg, France. I guess that was to reward me for my services.

Q: What had happened? What was the development? Had they sorted things out?

COMRAS: By 1985, the Third Country Initiative had been completed. The missile technology control regime was in place. The 1982 list review was over. The Soviet Gas Pipeline dispute was pretty much resolved. New issues and problems were arising, but they seemed less serious and now there were new experienced hands to deal with issues -people who had been involved increasingly in export control since 1983. I'd like to believe I taught a new group of younger officers to take export control issues seriously. By 1985 our attention was directed elsewhere as we began to move into a new period of more stable relations with the Soviet Union.

Q: Did you get involved with the pipeline issue?

COMRAS: Yes, very much so. The Gas pipeline dispute dealt with issues related to European policies and exports to the Soviet Union that could be used to construct a gas pipeline the Soviet Union intended to construct to export Soviet Union oil to the rest of Europe. Much of the equipment and technology wanted by the Soviet Union included U.S. technology and components. President Reagan had decided to not let U.S. companies provide material to the Soviet Union for this project. The Administration also put pressure on our allies not to participate in the project.



One of our greatest concerns was that the pipeline would bring the Soviet Union much needed hard currency that it would use to bolster its economy and permit it to devote more funds to defense expenditures. But, we were also concerned lest Europe become dependent on the Soviet gas pipeline. That would give the Soviet Union increased influence and leverage on Europe. But the Europeans were not of the same mind. "My God," they said, "Don't you Americans see what the Arab countries are doing to us? They are using oil as a lever against the West. There is an oil crisis in the world. We need more resources worldwide. We should develop as many resources as we can for oil and gas. This will leave us all in a better position." But we said, "No, we don't want that because that's going to embolden the Soviet Union."

The U.S. would not grant any reexport licenses for exports from Europe containing U.S. components or technology. In response the European countries began to require their companies to ignore such reexport license requirements. The line between foreign policy controls and strategic controls had faded completely when it came to the Soviet Gas Pipeline project.

It appeared that we had blundered badly into a major dispute with our allies. Adding insult to injury we got into another dispute with France over their export of equipment to construct a large Aluminum plant in the Soviet Union. We had denied licenses to the U.S. firm that originally received that contract, and were aghast that a French company had stepped in to replace the U.S. firm. Although some of this equipment was covered by COCOM review, the French never applied for COCOM approval.

I think considerable credit goes to the skill of some of our senior diplomats, that helped get out of this imbroglio. I guess I can take a little credit too. We worked out an agreement with the European countries to overlook the failure of certain European firms to get reexport licenses in return for the creation of new joint commissions to review the COCOM mechanisms and to strengthen the implementation of controls to reduce the leakage of sensitive technology to the Warsaw pact countries. This played also into gaining their support for the Third Country Initiative. COCOM came out of this affair strengthened and invigorated.

Q: We'll pick this up in 1985 when you're off to the hardship post of consul general in Strasbourg.\*\*\*

Today is July 26, 2002. You're going out as consul general to Strasbourg. You were there from when to when?

COMRAS: I was in Strasbourg from the summer of 1985 until the summer of 1989.

Q: Why did we have something in Strasbourg? What was our focus there?



COMRAS: The Strasbourg consulate was one of several U.S. consulates in France. At that time we also had consulates in Nice, Marseilles, Lyon, Bordeaux. There was also Consulate General Section in our embassy in Paris.

The Consulate General in Strasbourg had a consular district that included the eastern regions of France - Alsace, Lorraine, Franche -Compte, and Belfort. This was an historically very important part of France. This part of France was also unique in French history. These regions had passed back and forth between Germany and France for centuries.

The Strasbourg Consulate General was also unique in many respects, and had a function quite different from the other U.S. Consulates. In fact, it operated as a diplomatic mission to the Council of Europe, which was also based in Strasbourg.

Strasbourg was in many respects an international city. It had a very large diplomatic community that centered around the Council of Europe as well as the European Parliament and the other European institutions based in Strasbourg, including the European Commission and Court of Human Rights. Strasbourg considered itself one of the capitals of the European Community. The EU's European Parliament met in Strasbourg for a week once a month.

These institutions were the main focus of our Consulate in Strasbourg. The consulate also looked after the defined consular region, but provided only limited consular services in that regard.

There was a lot of confusion about the role of the Strasbourg Consulate. When the Department began looking to cut posts overseas for budget reasons, Strasbourg found itself on the list to cut, largely because of the limited consular services it provided. Even the embassy in Paris was willing to cut Strasbourg rather than any of the other consulates in France because it viewed the Strasbourg consular activities as marginal.

But, in fact, the Strasbourg Consulate played a key role as a U.S. diplomatic mission separate from these consular activities. This fact finally prevailed, but it took a great effort on my part to hold back the administrative and budget gurus who were determined to get rid of the post.

The Strasbourg Consulate had a very long history. We had a post there well into the last century. Strasbourg was French until 1871, when it was lost to Germany. France took Strasbourg back in 1918. Germany reincorporated Strasbourg during the Second World War. French Forces under General LeClerc, supported by U.S. forces under General Patch, liberated Strasbourg in 1944 and brought it back into France. Our consulate closed during the war periods, but reopened shortly after the liberation.



Q: Before we turn to the European EU side, whatabout your consular district? How did you find it at the time politically and economically?

COMRAS: The Strasbourg consular district was very exciting, politically, economically and historically in part because of its uniqueness and its unique history. Alsace and Lorraine are major heavy industry areas - Lorraine for the steel industry, Alsace for railroad construction. Both regions were heavy in technology. Franche Comte, was more rural, but enjoyed a famous university center in Besancon. The regions were also known for their great food, beer and wine industries. While economically vibrant, there were serious restructuring problems, particularly in the Lorraine Steel industry. This was also a major gateway for trade with the rest of Europe. Strasbourg was an important road and rail hub, and one of the most important river ports along the Rhine.

Politically, the eastern regions were going through significant changes. The area had generally, been center-right. However, the area was beginning to polarize between the Socialist Party on one side and the extreme right National Front on the other. The character of the area was also changing with the influx of a number of immigrants from North Africa. This was particularly the case in Strasbourg and the larger cities in Alsace and Lorraine. Because of vulnerabilities stemming from Strasbourgs position on the Franco-German border, the incidence of crime had increased during this same period. Much of this was attributed, rightly or wrongly to the increase in the immigrant population. There was a growing feeling among many native Alsatians and Vosgians, that their communities were being significantly altered. Some xenophobia resulted.

Also, this was a time when France was under great trauma from terrorism. Although it was very exciting to be going to Strasbourg in 1985, there were some downsides to be considered. One of the most significant downsides related to terrorism concerns for me and my family. Our predecessor, Bob Homme, had been shot by terrorists. He was shot by a member of the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction as he left his house (the residence). This happened one morning just as he was leaving the residence to go to the Consulate. He survived, but was very badly wounded. He was shot while backing out his car. There was a person repairing a motorcycle out in front of the house. As he pulled out the person got up and shot him through the window. Luckily for Homme, just a week before the Consulate had installed a gate opener so that he could remain in his car while exiting. If he had gotten out of his car to open or close the gate, he probably would not have survived. As it turned out, the terrorist had to shoot him through the car window. He was hit several times. The bullets came within millimeters of hitting vital organs. One bullet grazed his head. Fortunately, he had turned at that precise second or the bullet would have entered his brain. Fortunately for him and his family and for us all, he survived and the wounds ended up being neat and repairable.

The person who fired the shots was never caught. The ringleader of the group was caught several years later.



But, at the time we were in Strasbourg, both the Consulate and the Residence were under threat and the French government provided us special 24 hour protection. This included assigning two special GPN guards to accompany me whenever I left the residence or the Consulate.

During this same period we lost our military attaché<sup>1/2</sup> in Paris to assassination by terrorists. There had also been an attempt against our DCM. A car bomb set under his car didn't go off. However, and very sadly, a French policeman was killed when the bomb was being removed.

Q: What was behind this?

COMRAS: There were so many factors going on in that period of time. The situation in Lebanon was very unsettled with western interventions. There were a number of different homegrown terrorist groups also operating in the area including - the Red Army factions, the Red Brigade, as well as other terrorist groups in Germany and Italy. There were also a number of groups associated with one or another cause or faction or another in Algeria. Of course there were also issues related to the Palestinians, and to French interventions in Chad. Terrorism became a daily occurrence in France during this whole period with bombs going off in trash cans, car bombs, and various other things. It was a very difficult period from 1985 through 1989.

Q: This having happened to your predecessor, what did they do for you?

COMRAS: U.S. and French authorities took the issue of our security very seriously following the attack on Homme. They took a number of steps to tighten the security of the consulate and the residence. We were also given an armored car and a chauffeur. The French police set up a police box in front of the residence. They also gave us constant 24 hour close-on protection. They accompanied us everywhere I and my family went. This was particularly the case during the first 2 years. It tapered off a little after that. We also had security guards at the consulate and residence hired by the U.S. government.

Q: That must have been a real downer, wasn't it, as far as getting around?



COMRAS: It was something to which we had to adapt. The French had a team of specially trained policemen that were specially assigned to us. Over time we got to know them all well. They got to know us well. I don't know if it was the best from the security perspective, but we decided that the only way we could do this and be comfortable was by making them family. So, over time they became part of our family. So they got to know us and we them well enough that we were comfortable with them and they were comfortable with us. It worked well in that sense.

Q: You had children?

COMRAS: Yes, I had 2 sons.

Q: How old were they?

COMRAS: Both were young. Our son David was 8 and our son Manny was 13 when we came to Strasbourg. Manny was 17 and David was 12 when we left.

Q: How did they find this?

COMRAS: Constraining. It meant that they could not function in the same way as many of their friends. Their movements were restricted. It was difficult for them initially, but they adapted to it. The notion that we were all family helped them as well in this process.

Q: How about your wife?

COMRAS: She also went through a process of adaptation. Although the police protection was centered on me, they also had to cope with a number of constraints and restrictions. My wife recognized that there was a risk for her as well as for the children and so she assured that we all were cognizant of the risks and dealt with them accordingly. But there were times when we all had to escape from this. For us the way of getting out from this pressure would be to leave Strasbourg and go across the border into Germany.

Q: You were talking about the political spectrum in that area. You didn't mention the communists. At one point the communists were a third of the voting part. What had happened?



COMRAS: The Communist Party was still an important force in Eastern France. More so in Lorraine than in Alsace. Also the Communists were not very strong in Franche-Compte. The Communists were well organized among steel workers. There was not support for the Communists in Alsace and non steel parts of Lorraine. There are a number of reasons for this. One of them is that both Alsace and Lorraine were brought into Germany during the Nazi period from 1940 through 1944. All of Alsace was made part of Germany, and parts of Lorraine also were incorporated into Germany. As the men were considered by the Nazis to be German citizens, they were subject to the war drafts. A very large proportion of those drafted were sent to fight on the Eastern Front. Many were captured by the Russians and held as prisoners of war. Russia did not differentiate between the Alsacian prisoners and the German prisoners. And did not release the Alsacians until the early 1950s. This colored the attitudes of a great number of Alsatians toward the Soviet Union and the communists. It left them with a very bitter taste about Russia in the years following the war. So the Communist Party was not able to make much headway in Alsace.

The situation was very different in the Steel industry areas of Lorraine. The steel industry was going through some very difficult times. Many steel mills were closed and there was large unemployment. Slow progress was being made to restructure the steel industry and bring production standards and methods up to point. There was also a transformation into specialty steel. Also new programs were underway to restructure the local economies and to diversify. This was a difficult time for the Lorraine worker. The Communist party did well in playing to their concerns and gained significant support. This meant elected legislative deputies and majors and heads of local regional councils.

However, the center-right remained the largest political grouping in both Alsace and Lorraine. It was under increasing challenge from both the left and the right. That's pretty much the situation as I understand it still today in that part of France.

Q: Was there any feeling in Alsace towards Germany? Was this mixed identity a problem or had the European Union and developments in the past 40-odd years meant that you didn't have people sitting around drinking beer and talking about the good old days?



COMRAS: The pressures of history on Alsace had the effect of creating an "Alsacien" identity. This identity was not in conflict with their being French. It was in addition to their being French. They were proud of both heritages. While Alsacians had always felt a lot in common with their German brethren, their incorporation in Nazi Germany between 1940 and 1944 convinced most of them that they did not want to be German. There were perhaps periods of great ambivalence on the part of Alsace with respect to France and Germany, particularly when they were incorporated in Germany from 1871 to 1917/1918. Alsace had enjoyed great prosperity in that period before the beginning of World War I. This goodwill toward Germany lapsed completely during the second world war. However, even during the 1871-1918 period, many in Alsace resented Germany. They had preferred the French and saw the Germans as occupiers. I cite, for example, Bartholdi, the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty. He viewed the German period as a period of occupation. For him, Alsace had lost its freedom. This was a principal motivation for his work in creating the Statue of Liberty, which later became a gift of France to the United States.

Alsacians are a very proud people. They view themselves as a distinct part of France, but nevertheless French. In addition to French, Alsacians speak Alsatian which is a Germanic language.

I should tell you also that Alsace has closer ties with the United States than, perhaps any other region in France. Almost every Alsatian family has one or more immediate relatives who immigrated to the United States. The Alsacians and to a certain extent Lorraine also probably sent more immigrants to the U.S. than all the rest of France combined.

Q: France was never a major immigration source.

COMRAS: That's right. But every time Alsace or Lorraine moved back and forth between Germany and France, it sent a wave of immigrants to the United States. There are a number of Alsatian communities in the United States. Let me tell you one story about one community of Alsatians in the United States. The story starts back in the 1850s and 1860s. A Portuguese Jew by the name of Castro was given a land grant in Texas if he could attract an agreed number of people to settle there. This was a troubling period in Europe. So, he set off to Alsace and talked about this great place in the United States. He convinced a certain number of Alsatians to sign up. They formed the nucleus of settlers in the new town of Castroville, Texas. When Alsace passed to Germany in 1871 a wave of Alsatians left for the United States as immigrants. They went directly to Castroville, to join the small Alsatian community already there. The same thing happened during the First World War, and again during or just after the Second World War. Castroville is one of a few towns in the United States where a good part of the population speak Alsatian.



The east of France suffered enormously during the First and Second World Wars. From the staggering death toll of the battle of Verdun in the First World War to the Liberation of the Colmar pocket in February 1945 - the region witnessed some of the costliest battles in France. Americans were deeply engaged in a number of critical battles in this area, in both World War I and World War II. The largest American military cemeteries from World War I and World War II are located in Lorraine.

You may recall that Strasbourg took on great symbolic importance for the Free French during the Second World War. Those joining the Free French Forces pledged not to lay down their arms till Strasbourg was in French hands. The Strasbourg Cathedral was the symbol worn on their soldiers' shoulder patch.

Q: Did you find yourself attending a lot of ceremonies dealing with the world wars?

COMRAS: I certainly did. During my stay in Strasbourg I participated in a great number of ceremonies to mark the battles and the sacrifices of American, French, British and Canadian soldiers in the region. This included the Memorial Day, Armistice Day and other commemorative occasions. It also included the ceremonies associated with the 70th anniversary of the U.S. entry into World War I.

Let me tell you about the latter event. The American Ambassador at the time was Joe Rogers from Tennessee. He had a great interest in World War I. His father had come to France and fought in the first world war in eastern France. He was an officer in an engineering battalion that built or repaired many bridges and other structures in the region. He had written a letter to his wife dated November 24, 1918, less than 2 weeks after the Armistice, detailing to his wife all that he had done, the places that he had gone from village to village to village. So, Ambassador Rogers had the idea that to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the U.S. entry into World War I, he would retrace the steps of his father - from village to village through the whole area. He asked me to arrange this with the local authorities.

The French thought this was a great idea and we worked closely to put the appropriate events in place. We planned an itinerary that would challenge anyone - from village to village. We would start in the town of St. Mihiel and end at Chatel-Chehery, where Sergeant York became famous. In fact, the Tennessee Historical Society joined the events by dedicating a new plaque to Sergeant York in the Town Square of Chatel-Chehery.



The Ambassador reserved for us one great surprise until the last moment. He had invited his mother, in her early 90s, to accompany us on the trip. She was the one that had received and preserved the letter we used to plan the trip. Sara, my wife also joined us, as did Mrs. Honey Rogers, the wife of the Ambassador. Sara volunteered to accompany the two Mrs. Rogers and make sure that their own special needs were met. They all hit it off wonderfully, and thanks to Sara's efforts had a great time on a very grueling trip. The temperature was in the 90s and there were few of the facilities to accommodate the heat or nature's other requirements. I have to say that Sara did a marvelous job looking after the two Mrs. Rogers. In fact, they fell in love with her. Mrs. Rogers Sr. parting words as we saw them off on their plane back to Paris was "Joe, can't we take Sara with us?"

It was a wonderful trip. A wonderful occasion for Franco-American relations. Every town and village we visited welcomed us with flags and bands. The children of the town participated in the ceremonies. Each town set up photo and other exhibits demonstrating their own local history during World War One. It was just a wonderful occasion.

I'll tell you another little anecdote. The trip almost had a disastrous beginning, at least in a diplomatic sense. The first ceremonial stop was St. Mihiel. Ambassador Rogers had valiantly tried to learn French but never succeeded. However, he liked to read prepared statements in French. He did so whenever he could.

He asked the Military Attaches office to prepare a statement for the events in St. Mihiel. Through their own sources, they received information that the Mayor of St. Mihiel was going to present a plaque to the Ambassador to commemorate the occasion. They prepared a thank you statement in French for the Ambassador to accept the plaque. Turned out that they got it all wrong. The Mayor was not going to give the Ambassador a plaque. He was going to ask the Ambassador to unveil a plaque on the Hotel de Ville wall commemorating the Battle of St. Mihiel.

The Ambassador had memorized the French statement that had been prepared for him. Now, just at the last minute he needed a new statement - A statement that he could read without too many mistakes. Well, it was Sara to the rescue. My wife speaks native French. She sat down and wrote out phonetically a short appropriate statement the Ambassador could make, in simply French to unveil the plaque. He was forever greatly for the way she got him out of this fix.

Q: How did the mother do?

COMRAS: The mother did absolutely great, perhaps better than Joe in holding up to a very rigorous program. The trip was a great success. It underscored the enormous amount of affection that resides in that part of France for the United States. There are a lot of reasons for this affection.



There were two great battle areas in France where U.S. forces took very high casualties. One is Normandy and the landing, The second is the eastern part of France. Once the allies broke out of Normandy they advanced fairly quickly through the plains of France. However, they ran into increased opposition as they approached the Vosges and eastern France. These were areas that had been incorporated into Germany, or which had been specially fortified by Germany. The Vosges mountains were a natural defensive line. The French had used these mountains as part of their Maginot Line. They joined up with the Ardennes. That's where the Battle of the Bulge broke out. But, that battle had major ramifications for the areas further south also in Lorraine and northern Alsace, and for Strasbourg itself.

It proved very difficult for our troops to get over the Vosges. There were some great battles and we took enormous casualties. In fact, the last part of France to be liberated was Colmar, an area which became known as the Colmar pocket, which wasn't until February of 1945.

Q: That's where French armies ended up, too. American and French armies fought together.

COMRAS: Yes, especially when it came to taking Strasbourg. The American Fifth Army under General Patch was ordered by Eisenhower to allow General LeClerc to come across first to liberate Strasbourg. This was a great gesture made by Eisenhower, and was always greatly appreciated by General LeClerc, if not by General De Gaulle.

The Battle of the Bulge came shortly after the liberation of Strasbourg. The initial German advance posed grave risks for Strasbourg. The best military advice was that Strasbourg was extremely vulnerable and would likely fall back into German hands, creating an entrapment situation for American and French soldiers. So, General Eisenhower was advised by his people that Strasbourg should be evacuated. De Gaulle fought this tooth and nail and made a very strong plea to Eisenhower not to evacuate Strasbourg. He wanted to hold Strasbourg at all costs. Eisenhower wrote later in his memoirs that only one time did he deviate from his policy of not allowing political factors to influence his judgment on military issues, and that was with respect to Strasbourg. Military reasoning would have led to an evacuation of Strasbourg. But, he allowed himself to be swayed by De Gaulle. He decided to hold in Strasbourg. And, in the end, thank God, Strasbourg held.



There is another little story about that came to our attention. One day it ought to be the subject of a movie. While the Battle of the Bulge was raging further north and west, one of the largest tank confrontations during the war took place just north of the city of Strasbourg. At the same time as the Battle of the Bulge was raging, the Germans, sought to encircle Strasbourg. There were a number of villages in the mountains just north of Strasbourg where we had troops bivouacked for rest and relaxation. A segregated black American anti-tank brigade was stationed in two of these villages. The brigade was one of a few that had not yet been integrated. The Brigade had a poor reputation and was not noted as showing any valor. It had not distinguished itself in the war. They took the brunt of this German tank attack. Against considerable odds they held these villages and halted the German tank advance. They took enormous casualties. They were all heroes. They probably more than anyone or anything else they saved Strasbourg. They held until adequate reinforcements could be provided. The story is written up in a few little journals. It was told to me by a several elderly residents in the area. It's a story that I always said I wanted to do something more with. It's a story that should be told.

I later found out that Senator Ernest Hollings fought in this same area. He told me that he had helped liberate Strasbourg. I met him at the time the State Department had targeted the Strasbourg Consulate for closing. He was opposed to that. He was on a visit to Strasbourg and told me of his own experiences in the War. I remember that as we were walking to the Strasbourg cathedral, he turned to me and said, "Vic, they'll close Strasbourg over my dead body. I helped defend this place and keep it free."

The French have a very strong attachment to Alsace and Lorraine. The Americans who fought in this area also are tied by strong emotions to the region. As Consul General it was one of my duties to preside over the Memorial Day ceremonies at the various American Military Cemeteries in the consular district. Each year I would attend ceremonies at, at least two of the five 5 American military cemeteries in the district.

A huge crowd of French men women and children would turn out at each of these occasions. These ceremonies served to underscore just how close we were attached to each other in this war. This relationship cast in blood still colors their favorable feelings towards the United States today.

Q: On the political side, how well did that area feel it was being represented and dealt with by the central government in Paris?



COMRAS: There were times when they felt they were very different than the rest of France. They had their complaints. But they were a political stronghold of the central right. During most of the time I was there, there was a central right government in Paris. Still, there were a number of complaints concerning immigration policy, rising crime rates, competition from Germany, and desire for improved infrastructure. There were also strong complaints concerning the downturn in the Lorraine Steel industry.

Q: One of the things you mentioned was that the steel mills had to close. One of the things... The French even with a right-wing or center-right government, maybe it was worse later than it was then, but did you see that the French economy, it was difficult for French business to operate because it was hard to shut down people, let people go, once they were hired, you couldn't eliminate workers who weren't needed? Was that a problem?

COMRAS: Pretty much the whole region of Lorraine felt the effect of the depressed steel industry. There was high unemployment through most of the northern part of Lorraine. This is the area where the Communist Party began to get increased support. It was a very difficult period for that region. Nevertheless, new programs were begun to transform the steel industry and to diversify the industrial economy of the region. This included the introduction of new high tech industries. These reforms were moving ahead only slowly and this gave rise to strong complaints.

Pittsburgh Pennsylvania provided a good example of the type of reforms that we necessary. There was great interest in what was going on in Pittsburgh during this same timeframe.

It's interesting that you had this growth of this communist party. You had the steel industry. You had great concerns about competition issues and import issues and restrictions. The United States was going through the same thing. There were complaints and counter-complaints between the United States and France about unfair trade practices, particularly in the steel sector. Yet the sympathy for the United States in the region held strong. This was so even in areas where the Communist Party had the support of a majority of the electorate. I believe these positive feelings toward the United States were tied in to the historical relationships and the relationships forged during the Second World War.

I was invited to participate in a great number of popular events in the area. Without exception I was received with great friendship and courtesy. I remember one event that involved the departure of a number of American High School Students that had spent a semester in the French Schools in the region. The whole town turned out to say goodbye.



The 5 American military cemeteries in the region were a reminder to all of the sacrifices made during the two world wars. These cemeteries were managed extremely well by the American Battleground Commission. But, just after the war, there were many, many, more cemeteries in the region where American and other allied soldiers were buried. A decision was made in the late 1940s to repatriate many of these American dead and to consolidate the others in the established American Military Cemeteries. This process took several years. Yet, today, the previous burial grounds remain hallowed ground for the villages where they were located. Many of the villages and towns put up special monuments or markers to identify and honor these hallowed areas. I attended a great many of the ceremonies that were held to honor these sites.

There was also another major event that marked the strong links between Alsace and the United States during my tenure there. That was the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. Most Americans don't know that the Statue of Liberty is Alsatian. The sculpture of the Statue of Liberty was Frederic Bartholdi, an Alsatian. The face on the statue is the face of his mother. They were from the town of Colmar, just south of Strasbourg.

Bartholdi set out to sculpt a major statue dedicated to Liberty. He wanted it to represent his sadness at the loss of freedom, as he saw it, that derived from the German occupation of his homeland, and home town of Colmar after the War of 1871. He looked for a commission to build such a statue and to find the right setting for it. He looked many places, including in Egypt. But eventually he found the perfect spot for it during a trip to the United States - New York Harbor. Then he had to convince the French government to commission his project. The French decided to support the project and turn it into a gift to the American People for the Centennial of the United States in 1876. For a number of reasons, including the fact that the United States was unable to provide come up with the funds necessary to build a foundation of base for the statue, it remained in storage for a decade. It was not until 1886, 10 years after the American centennial that the statue was finally erected in New York harbor. Bartholdi was French-Alsatian. Louis Eiffel, who built the support structure for the Statue was also French, and the Statue of Liberty.

So, the celebrations that marked this occasion were also very big celebrations throughout Alsace. I got to play a major role in these celebrations as American Consul General in Alsace. I think my role became even more important because I could speak French, which the Ambassador couldn't. That meant that I was invited to all the TV Talk Shows to represent and talk about the U.S. perspective on these events.

Q: Did you get Alsatian dignitaries to the ceremonies?COMRAS: Yes. In fact, the mayor of Strasbourg was invited to join the foreign dignitaries hosted on board special ships in New York Harbor the July 4, 1986 celebration of the statue. We were in the town of Colmar at our own very beautiful celebration on the same day.



Q: Was there much in the way of trade promotion there or links to American firms?

COMRAS: Business activity and investment had slowed in the mid-1980s due to a general recession in Europe. The pace of activity began to accelerate in 1988-89. The business community in eastern France had a high degree of familiarity with the United States and the American market. Also there were a number of major American companies that had offices and factories in eastern France. Some of the largest companies in Alsace were American companies. General Motors had a major plant in Alsace not far from Strasbourg. Timkin, had a large ball bearing factory in Colmar. Eli Lili had a large facility just outside of Strasbourg. There were also a growing number of American high companies in the area. All and all it amounted to a sizeable U.S. business presence in the region.

Eastern France was an area targeted by American companies for further investment. A number of American companies were looking to establish themselves in Europe and this appeared to be an attractive area given its location in the heart of Europe right along the French-German border and along the best of the north-south-east-west access routes in the region.

Trade and investment is a two-way street, and there were a number of American states that were also doing their best to attract investment from eastern France. This was particularly the case for North and South Carolina and many of the sunbelt states. Several states had established business, trade and investment offices in Strasbourg. There was significant business activity in both directions.

Q: Were there consular problems, people getting arrested, kids in trouble, split families?

COMRAS: The Consulate provided only very limited consular services. These included welfare and whereabouts. We did not provide passport or visa services except to take applications and forward them to Paris for processing. We also handled other consular services related to American services.

But let me tell you another story about one of our consular cases:



Back in 1962, during the time when Americans had military bases in France, an American soldier stationed at a base near Metz, in Lorraine, met and married a French girl. They had a son born to them in France. Shortly afterward, in late 1963 the soldier was transferred back to the United States and released from military service. His French wife and child accompanied him to the United States. They moved to Iowa. The family became a typical American family and raised a typical American son. In 1988 the son gets married to an American girl and they decide to go to Europe for their honeymoon. First they visit Germany and Switzerland. The mother suggest that they also go to France to visit with family members they had never met. So the young couple decides to take the train from Switzerland to Metz, France where the French family members live. The train crosses the border at the city of St. Louis, near Mulhouse, France. That is where customs procedures are handled and visas are checked. The train arrived at the St. Louis Station late Friday afternoon. The young man presented his American passport. He was surprised at how long it took for the authorities to process it and return it to him. While he was waiting, two French Gendarmes appear and arrest him. He is charged with evasion of French military service.

Of course, he's horrified. His wife is horrified. They're on their honeymoon and he's being pulled away by the French police. Neither of them speaks a word of French. They have absolutely no idea what's going on. He is brought by the Gendarmes to a holding cell in the station and eventually from the border into a French military detention center near the town of Mulhouse. The wife doesn't know quite what to do. She calls the U.S. embassy in Paris and they tell her to call the consulate in Strasbourg. Luckily I was working late and took the call. She was very distraught. After calming her down I was able to ascertain what had happened. I got her to go to the station master's office and arranged with the Station Master to allow her to stay by the phone so that I could call her back, which I promised to do quickly once I had reviewed the matter with the appropriate French authorities.

Fortunately, I had very good contacts with the *prefet* and the military governor in Mulhouse. I think it is so important for our Consulate Officers to have close contact with the local officials. That's what they are there for. Consular officers have a better opportunity to meet and know local officials than those in the embassy. Handled right, a consulate can be very effective eyes, ears and mouth for an embassy when it comes to dealing with events on the ground.

So, anyway, I called the *prefet* in Mulhouse and was able, because I knew him well, to get him on the line directly and quickly. We both realized that what had happened was an embarrassing anomaly. The young man had been outside of France since his infancy. He was an American citizen. He probably no longer had French citizenship. The problem was that his birth was recorded in France and his parents had never notified the French authorities or the French embassy in the United States concerning his departure from France and probable change of citizenship status.



The French authorities had a record of his birth in Metz. These records are reported to the French Bureau of National Service (their Draft Board). When he failed to show up to register for the French Draft, they sent a letter of notification and warning to his last known address in France. When he still didn't respond, they put him in their look-out book as a possible draft dodger. That list was triggered when he handed over his passport at the Mulhouse border. From that point, they treated him according to established procedures for those seeking to evade French Military Service. They hand him over to the French Military Authorities.

The Prefet suggested I call the Military Governor and see what we could do to resolve the problem. However, it was already late Friday afternoon, and there did not appear to be a solution at hand, at least until Monday morning when the Office of National Service would reopen and the mess could be straightened out.

I knew the Military Governor in Mulhouse to be a real French gentleman. I was sure that he would understand the situation and work with me to find a solution. After all, the couple were on their honeymoon. And that should appeal to the romantic side of any French gentleman. I explained the situation, and appealed to sense of the romantic. What French General wanted to be responsible for destroying this young couple's honeymoon. Especially since the problem here was more technical than real. He promised to consider what I said and see if he could find some solution. He promised to call me back shortly. A short while later, he did call me back. We were pretty much on a first name basis, so he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do. We've got him under military jurisdiction. Since we've got him under military jurisdiction, I can give him a 3 day pass. I'll do that on one condition, that you come up and get him, that you assure to me that you will keep him in your control, and make sure that he shows up at the Office of National Service in Strasbourg when it opens on Monday morning to straighten all this out." We agreed.

I called his wife to explain the situation, and tell her about the conditions imposed. I offered to pick her up and then get her husband from the French Military Garrison. I offered to put them up in our guest house until Monday when a member of my staff would accompany them to the Office of National Service. She agreed and was so very relieved.

We put them in the guesthouse over the weekend. They toured around Strasbourg a little bit. They were a very nice couple. We took them down on Monday morning to the Office of National Service and got everything straightened out. He thanked us very much for that at the end and then he said, "This has been a terrible weekend in many ways, but a great weekend in some. But I'll tell you one thing, this is a very unique story that I'll have to tell my kids and my grandkids, that I was part of the French army for 3 days and I have a pass to prove it!"

Q: I had an American major in Greece who was born in Greece and they tried to... What the hell is this? It's a real problem sometimes.



COMRAS: Unfortunately, many of the other stories were not as happy. Because of the very large number of American tourists that come through Europe, there are bound to be some difficult, unfortunate, and sometimes even tragic, happenings. I still feel sad to think about the tragic accidents and deaths I had to deal with. But, I like to tell the happy-ending stories.

Q: Did you have drug problems, kids getting arrested for possession of drugs?

COMRAS: Fortunately, we did not have very many cases involving Americans arrested for drugs. However, Strasbourg and Alsace were major transit points for the movement of illegal drugs across France. This was prior to the Schengen Agreements which opened the internal borders between the EU members. During the 1985-89 timeframe, border controls remained in effect. The French applied a major effort to cutting off the flow of illicit drugs into France. Local drug use was not so much of a problem in Alsace at that time. We did have a few Americans in jail on drug related charges. We provided them the appropriate consular services, including periodic visits.

Let me tell you another story. We did have another major incident with the local police that turned out to be quite humorous. I think the story reflects some the tensions and precautions that were in place due to the wave of terrorism that was going through France at that time. As I said earlier there were a lot of student groups that visited Strasbourg. Many of them attended French Universities for semester or summer programs. One student group from a women's college in the United States was studying that summer in Strasbourg. The American students were invited to visit the local newspaper to see how the newspaper was put together. The visit, which took place over several hours, began in the early evening and went on until late that night when the newspaper was put in print. Since the paper was printed at a fairly late hour in the evening, they took them around first to show them and showed them the newsroom and then they took the group to a dinner at a restaurant several blocks away. After dinner the students were to return to the Newspaper for the last part of the tour. The students had a wonderful time eating and drinking and perhaps drinking in many cases more than they should. This was particularly the case for one young lady.

After dinner the group left the restaurant to return to the Newspaper. During the several block walk back, this young lady felt an enormous urge to go to the bathroom. There were no places in site, so decided to break away from the group and to go up a quiet back alley where she could find some privacy. She found herself a small area hidden by some walls, and decided to relieve herself. What she didn't know was that this was the side of the main police station and that everything she was doing was being monitored on camera.



I'm not sure the French Officer monitoring the camera quite understood what was going on. In any event it looked suspicious enough for him to send out two plainclothed policemen to check it out. When they see the lady squatting there, they move quickly to intercept her. She's in an particularly awkward position and she sees these 2 guys running towards her, so she quickly gets up and takes off. She left so fast, that she left her handbag and a package back along the wall. Could be a bomb! The police don't know what to think of this, so they take off after her. They tackle her and they grab her and they bring her back into the station. They realized quickly what she was up to and decided to let her go. Well, the next day I, I get a call from both the school and from the police captain. The calls come in one right after the other. The one from the police station came in first and it says, "Listen, we want to apologize. I know we created a little bit of an incident here, but we wanted you to know what happened, that we didn't know how to take it." They were afraid that somehow there was going to be a complaint from the University about the incident and the tackling of the young women. They didn't mean to rough her up or anything of this sort, they said.

Then we get a call from the school which went something like this: "We're sorry. We didn't know we were causing an incident. We didn't want to create a problem with the French government or the French police, but this young lady had had too much to drink and it was all a very innocent thing. Please make sure that you can get the police to overlook this and not hold it against her."

It was great to be able to Subsequently tell both groups, "Yes, I've solved your problem!"

One more story because this reflects another part of the role of a Diplomat and of a Consulate.

After arriving in Strasbourg in July 1985, one of the first issues I faced, was the local reaction to planned visit by President Ronald Reagan that summer to France. President Reagan decided to attend ceremonies in Europe to mark the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II. He wanted also to reflect the rapprochement in European relations and U.S.- European relations. He decided that he should visit a German military cemetery, and American veteran groups also decided it would be appropriate to invite German veterans to attend special ceremonies at the American Cemetery in St. Avold. The German Cemetery was at Bitburg, and included a large number of SS soldiers. The Unit invited to St. Avold also included SS veterans. Well, this idea did not go down well with the French, or with French veterans, or Jewish groups in the area. There was a general outcry against the idea and threats of local boycotts of the ceremony, and even a human shield blockade of the cemetery. The American Consulate was the first place to which the French brought their protest.



Even in the United States there were a number of people who questioned the wisdom of the President's visit to the Bitburg Cemetery and the emotions that it would raise. Within France, it raised considerable emotion that President Reagan was going to do this. But, what happened in Germany was one matter. What would happen in France was another. There was an enormous outcry on the part of the French community against the St Avoird invitation. We were asked as a U.S. Consulate to convey these feelings to the United States authorities, and to the American veteran groups sponsoring the St. Avoird ceremonies. These veteran groups were free to do what they wanted. And it was the policy of the American Battle Monument Commission to allow any U.S. veteran group to sponsor a commemorative ceremony. They could invite whoever they wanted, so long as the decorum of the cemetery was respected.

So, I had to contact the American sponsors and explain to them the local reaction. Fortunately, when we were in discussions with the American veterans groups - of course all decisions were theirs - they recognized that it probably was not in their best interest and it would not be conducive to what they were trying to do to have this kind of local reaction. They did not want to cause this kind of bad feelings. So, I think wisely, they decided that it would be better for them to hold the ceremony at St. Avoird with only the U.S. veterans present and to meet with their former German adversaries in Germany at a German cemetery. The American veterans agreed to hold their own private ceremony at St. Avoird. And that is what happened.

I can only wonder what the feelings would be today and how things might have changed since then. But, in 1985 the war years were still fresh memories. Now we're perhaps in a somewhat different situation in Europe with the European Union and with the experience that France and Germany have had in working together with a common political ideology, with a common currency right now, and the rapprochement between France and Germany. Another 20 years have passed.Q: Speaking of emotions, did you run across in your part of France, one of the subjects I always open up with somebody who served in France, usually in Paris, is the intellectuals, who are by their chromosomes sort of as a class left-wing, kind of anti-American or quite anti-American. It seems to be a Parisian clique, their chattering class, but it has some clout within the French political world. Did you find any equivalent to or reflection of that in your area?

COMRAS: Yes and no. I would apply the "No" to Lorraine and Alsace. Their intellectual ties with the United States, their basic feelings towards the United States, are very strong. They have not adopted the Gaullist philosophy, and particularly reject that part of Gaullist philosophy that related to distancing France from the United States. The intellectual community has been very close to the United States and cross-fertilized.



The "Yes" would apply more to Belfort and Franche-Compte. These areas had a different history than Alsace and Lorraine. Neither were incorporated in Germany after the 1871 war or during the world wars. Besancon, the capital of the Franche Compte region is a French University Town. I think the atmosphere there would be similar to that at the Sorbonne. One could sense a resentment toward the There has at the Sorbonne and other places with a lot of those who resented America during the Vietnam War which was somewhat past then but resented American culture in many ways. I think this attitude vis a vis the United States was reflected best by Jean Pierre Chevenement, who was the most notable of the French political leaders from Belfort. He was a strong critic of the United States, although he held a grudging respect for America.

Q: Who is still a political figure today?

COMRAS: Yes. Chevenement is still active, although he was quite ill a couple of years ago. They call him the socialist De Gaulle. His "France First" attitude is very Gaullist. During the period I knew him he was concerned about what he viewed as the growing hegemony of the Soviet Union and the United States - "Europe against the two empires," as he phrased it. We got to know him quite well, and he was always very friendly to my wife and me. We had a number of political discussions with him.

Q: Was there a lot of reporting and excessive reporting on horrible events that the United States has done in the treatment of crimes or what have you both in the U.S.-

COMRAS: Not so much from the regions that I was in, but there's a whole other side of Strasbourg. Remember, the Strasbourg Consulate dealt mostly with the European institutions in Strasbourg. That accounted for about 80 percent of our work. Only about 20 percent of our time was related to the regional issues and our work related to the embassy in Paris. It was our role as a stand-alone mission to the European institutions in Strasbourg - The Council of Europe, the European Commission and Court of Human Rights, that made our role in France unique among the Consulates. We also played a support role for our Mission in Brussels to the EU since the European Parliament met in Strasbourg for one week each month.



U.S. economic, political, social, and cultural happenings and attitudes were often an issue up for discussion or debate in one or another of these European Institutions. This was particularly so with the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Our work dealt mostly with the latter. The European Union was covered mostly out of our mission in Brussels. They would send someone down to Strasbourg to spend the week if the European Parliament was in session. So they were responsible out of Brussels to do most of the issues related to the European Parliament. Our role was logistical supportive but there were many times when we would have to help and cover for them or handle specific matters. Ours was a secondary relationship with the European Parliament. But we had primary responsibility vis a vis the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Court and Commission of Human Rights. These institutions represented the broader Europe. At that time it was the Europe of 21 as opposed to the EU which was the Europe of 12.Q: What was the relationship of the Council of Europe to what is now the European Union? Was this an appendix or an earlier manifestation?

COMRAS: The Council of Europe was the first attempt at European unification. It traces back to 1947 when Winston Churchill proposed the establishment of a Council of Europe to build a peaceful, more stable Europe. The concept behind the Council of Europe was the establishment of a unified Europe achieved through a process of harmonization of its laws and structures and on increased cooperation. The Council of Europe was created with that ideal of bringing together those countries that could form and work and begin to heal the wounds of War in the post-World War II. And to prevent such wars from happening again. Germany was brought into the organization at an early stage. But because of the occupation of Germany, a decision was made to keep the Council of Europe out of issues related to security and defense. Such issues were to be relegated to NATO. The Council of Europe was an European structure for dealing with political, social, cultural, and other kinds of issues, not defense and security.

Subsequently, with the Treaty of Rome, several European countries decided to move further and faster on European Unification. They established a coal and steel community, and went on to form a customs union. Slowly the idea emerged to create a unified Europe based on integration rather than just harmonization of laws and institutions. This was going to be Europe on the fast track. As the European Community grew in importance the Council of Europe appeared to some to decrease in importance. But, this was really not the case. Europe needed both types of organizations, and still needs them today. Although the European Union has grown considerably, the Council of Europe still has many more members, and provides an essential institution for unification and harmonization within the Broader Europe. This was particularly the case in the 1980s.



In the beginning the European Community was principally a customs and economic institution and a customs union. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, the Council of Europe had a broader mandate. But, over this time, the European Community took on greater form and responsibility and grew into the European Union with political as well as economic and social responsibilities. The train on the fast track quickly passed the train on the slow track. The European Community also grew from its initial 6 to 7 and more. It was already 12 by 1985.

The European Union began to act as a single bloc within the Council of Europe. They became the dominant political force within the Council of Europe, and began to define the role of the Council of Europe in more limited terms. In fact, by 1985 they had decided that the role of the Council of Europe needed to be redefined in light of the development of the European Community.

The initial impetus was to redefine the Council of Europe, and its subsidiary organs as an institution devoted to social and cultural issues, and as a bridge between the European Community to the broader Europe of 21. It was also to serve as a bastion for democracies. However, its role was clearly secondary to the role of the European Communities institutions. The debate over a new mandate for the Council of Europe took a dramatic turn, however, with the dramatic events underway in Eastern Europe.

The members of the European Community recognized that the Council of Europe served an important function in holding the Broader Europe together. One of the unintended consequences of the EC was that it risked dividing Europe rather than unifying Europe. A division was already developing between EC members and EC nonmembers. The Council of Europe was an essential element for keeping and building European commonality and European unity in the broader sense. At the same time, it was a good holding place to put countries that needed to feel that they were part of Europe and not being pushed aside by the European Union even if they were not yet ready to come into the European Union. It was a good holding place for European countries, EC members and Non EC members to continue their work towards harmonizing laws and institutions and maintaining close consultation and cooperation.

Then when the Berlin wall came tumbling down! What a dramatic change for the World, for Europe, and for the Council of Europe.



With the changes taking place in Europe the need for a broader European Home grew in importance. The European Union was obviously not ready to expand to encompass more of greater Europe. The Council of Europe became the essential European organization with this purpose. It took on greater importance in setting the European standard for respect of democracy and civil rights, and human rights. The Convention of the Council of Europe set a high bar for membership with regard to democracy and human rights. Countries that aspired to COE membership had to meet those standards. This was the first precondition to participating in European harmonization or integration. Some wanted to dilute the COE requirements in this regard, but the majority insisted that these standards hold.

The Council of Europe also played a role in preparing and strengthening good governance in the emerging European democracies. They helped the aspiring new members to establish or improve their systems of governance to meet European Council standards. These activities were very important to us as well. However, it took us some time to recognize that we should also join with the Council of Europe in assisting this process.

We also were slow to recognize that the Council of Europe could provide us an effective channel also for improving cooperation with Europe. It provided a useful backdoor into the EU itself in getting ideas and concepts across to the EU leadership. The Council of Europe offered great potential for U.S.-European Cooperation on equal terms.

In the beginning we had a stand-offish attitude toward the Council of Europe. For reasons I do not understand we concentrated all of our diplomatic resources in dealing directly with the EU Commission and Council. We allowed the process to develop into an "Us and Them" relationship, rather than into a cooperative relationship. Europe and the United States were more and more defining themselves as separate entities. The concept of an Atlantic community had become secondary to the notion of European integration. We were faced with a EU bloc. We had to deal with a bloc, not with a group of allies. This made reaching agreements very difficult. The EU had to first work out its own common decisions. It would take considerable negotiations, discussions and concessions among them to come to an agreed EU position. Often this reflected a lowest common denominator between them. When we got into the discussions or negotiations were faced with a EU position that had little or no flexibility. This produced a lot of tension in these discussions. Sometimes we tried to use surrogates within the EU to reflect our views. But this was not always useful or possible.



The Council of Europe, working within the process of harmonization and cooperation, offered a forum that might have been easier to work with. Several European non EU countries welcomed our participation in that forum. They saw potential benefits in getting an alignment of views with the United States that could help strengthen their own hand in dealing with the EU. After all, they were outsiders too. The Council of Europe was also a place where we could contribute to the form and development of new laws, procedures and regulations to cover new developments and new technologies. If we worked together in designing these laws, we could eliminate unnecessary differences and head off potential future problems. This was important, for example in the new computer technology, information technology and pharmacology and bio-engineering technology areas. This was also true in areas of social reform and cultural cooperation.

I believe that the Council of Europe should have been used by the United States as a potential forum where we could influence our European friends and allies on these broader issues, gauge their attitudes and fashion new approaches. We also could have used the Council of Europe better to work toward good governance in the newly emerging European democracies.

Q: '89 was when the heavens fell and you ended up with a whole Eastern Europe which was clamoring to get in.

COMRAS: I have to tell you a story about that, too. July 1989 was the final month of my assignment to Strasbourg. It was also the month that Gorbachev came to town. He had visited Paris and was scheduled to make a major address to a combined session of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Before getting into this story let me step back and explain to you the difference between the parliaments.

The European Parliament is the legislative branch of the European Union. Members of the European parliament are elected directly by an electorate in each of the member countries.



The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe predates the European Parliament. It was established as a consultative organ within the Council of Europe. It is composed of national parliamentarians who are selected by their peers to represent their national parliaments in the Council of Europe. Each member of the Parliamentary Assembly is also a member of his national parliament. The delegations from those national parliaments must represent all the significant political factions that sit in the national parliament according to a complex formula established by the Council of Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly has no real legislative power, but can only make recommendations to the Council of Europe's Council of Ministers, or to the national government. However, as they are sitting members of their own national parliaments, and representative of those institutions, their recommendations can carry a lot of weight.

Anyway Gorbachev decided that rather than pick and choose between these two important European Parliamentary institutions, it would be best to speak to both of them together. At the time both parliaments met in the same building, the Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg, but on different dates. So a joint session had to be specially arranged. This was to be the first joint session ever. But Gorbachev was a big enough draw to get both parliaments to agree to such an arrangement.

Gorbachev's visit to Strasbourg turned into a major event for the Europeans and for our small Consulate General. The speech he gave had great historic significance. He used it to announce the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine. I remember well the moment that he got to that part of the speech. He stopped reading his text. He hesitated for a moment and then he said "These are words, but I can assure you that you will see the deeds in the reflection of these words." I was very excited about his speech and these words. I had Senator Alfonse D'Amato with me in the Gallery at the time. He had come to Strasbourg with a small congressional delegation to represent the United States.



When the speech ended I ran back to the Consulate and called Washington immediately. They were just opening in the morning for business. I went over the text of the speech and told the Office that report to in the State Department that "Gorbachev just announced the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine." I couldn't get anyone back in Washington to take me seriously. They dismissed my analysis and asked only about what he had to say in the speech about arms control. At the time there was a small crisis with the placement of long range missiles in Europe. They asked me to read them the part of the text dealing with arms control. I did. The only response I got was - "We don't see anything new in the speech, Why don't you just send it in?" I told them I thought they were crazy. Man, this is the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine." They said, "Well, send it in and we'll look at it." I got the speech off to them right away and I wrote my own reporting telegram laying out my interpretations. I told them that the speech represented the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine. It's in that reporting cable. Nobody took it seriously. Ten days later I left Strasbourg on reassignment. In November, we saw the events that Gorbachev said would reflect the words in his speech. I had it right. The Department had it wrong. We now attribute to that speech by Gorbachev the announcement of the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Q: It does point out that nobody was really ready for the earth shaking change that happened at the end of 1989. Here was a precursor of that and nobody was thinking in those terms.

COMRAS: Yes. It did catch everybody by surprise. I remember the thrill of the surprise of watching the Berlin Wall come tumbling down. It was a really...

Q: We'll cut it off here. I'd like to talk next about what your impression was of the composition of this, the clout that each had, both the European Parliament and the Council of Europe and the rivalry or how that harmonized, how you operated in this...

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Today is December 6, 2002. You were in Strasbourg from when to when?

COMRAS: From July 1985 to August of 1989.

Q: Let's talk about how you saw the various elements of Europeanization that were in Strasbourg fitting together or not fitting together.



COMRAS: Strasbourg provided a very interesting vantage point to see what was happening in Europe. The city is right on the Franco-German border and right in the heart of Western Europe. It had a vocation as a European Capital dating back to the end of the War and the establishment of the first organizations for European unity. Strasbourg's history reflected the history of Europe and the historic tensions between Germany and France. Both countries felt strong emotional ties to Strasbourg.

The town reflects characteristics of both France and Germany. It was logical that it be considered the first capital devoted to post war European unification. In 1947, with Winston Churchill there, the Council of Europe was established in Strasbourg with the task of working toward the peaceful unification of Europe. The organization grew from an initial membership of nine countries to 23 countries by the time I left in 1989. It is considerably bigger now.

Q: We're talking about '85 to '89. From your vantage point, how did the elements of trying to put Europe together work?

COMRAS: The unification of Europe was proceeding on two separate tracks. A fast track represented by the European Community and a slow track represented by the Council of Europe. There was growing tension between these two tracks as the Council of Europe tried to define a role that was both consistent with, but different from the role of the European Community.

The European Community was the main economic and political force in Europe. It was growing rapidly in importance. Even the countries that originally opted out of the European Community began to reconsider their position. EC expansion was a foregone conclusion.

The Council of Europe seemed to be receding in importance. Its actions were already dominated by the EC bloc of countries. It looked to some that the Council of Europe would be bypassed or shunted aside by the EC. Some argued that the Council of Europe had become redundant.

But, on the other hand, there were also a number of European leaders that recognized that further expansion of the European Community was not imminent and that special consideration had to be given to maintaining the cohesion of the broader Europe. In their view the Council of Europe's mandate should be redefined and the organization reinvigorated.

Q: What sort of role were you playing?



COMRAS: The Strasbourg Consulate General's main responsibility was to deal with the European institutions in Strasbourg. This was one of our diplomatic windows on Europe. The State Department had kept it as a small window - probably smaller than it should have been. But, nevertheless, it (We) provided a valuable perspective on what was going on in Europe. The Consulate was, in fact, the U.S. link with the organization of the Broader Europe.

Of course, the U.S.' major emphasis was with the European Community. That's where we put most of our diplomatic chips. We had left only one small chip - our small consulate in Strasbourg - to deal with the Council of Europe.

The CSCE/OSCE represented a mélange of varying standards when it came to democracy and human rights. It represented the lowest common denominator among its member countries. The Council of Europe had set a much higher standard, and we wanted to get these countries in the East to reflect this higher standard.

Despite considerable disinterest in Washington, I remained very active in establishing and fostering relationships between the United States and the Council of Europe. I was particularly successful in creating new relationships between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the U.S. Congress. This included putting together a joint Worldwide democracy building project that became known as the Strasbourg Conference on Democracy. I also was very active in assuring U.S. attitudes and positions were known and reflected in discussions within the Committee of Ministers and the Parliament. I represented the United States at a number of COE sponsored gatherings dealing with legal, social and cultural issues. I am very proud of the record I established there. My work there was recognized by a Superior Honor Award from the State Department. I was also honored by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe when they formally presented me with their President' medal for my contributions to U.S.-European Relations.

I should tell you also that a good part of the period between 1985 and 1987 was taken up with another distraction. This was the decision taken by the State Department in 1987 to close the U.S. Consulate General in Strasbourg for budgetary reasons. Strasbourg was among 15 Consulates designated for closing as a cost cutting measure.



This planned move was a clear indication that many in the State Department did not understand the unique and important non consular role that the mission in Strasbourg played. It also showed the same amount of ignorance at the Embassy in Paris. The embassy was willing to sacrifice Strasbourg in order to keep all of the other consulates - in Lyon, Bordeaux and Marseilles. They rationalized that our work in Strasbourg could be handled via the EU Mission in Brussels.

The planned closing of the Strasbourg consulate became something of a cause celebre on both sides of the Atlantic.

In early 1987 we got word that the State Department had decided to close up to 15 additional consulates in the second phase of its cost cutting program. These cuts were being made to reflect continuing shortfalls in the State Departments budget. The State department had originally intended to close Lyon in this phase, rather than Strasbourg. But, under pressure from Ambassador Rodgers in Paris, had put that move on hold. But, there was still a need to cut at least one consulate in France. An agreement was finally worked out between the embassy in Paris, the U.S. Mission to the European Community in Brussels, and the European Bureau in the State Department that the Strasbourg Consulate would be closed, the functions of the consulate vis a vis the Council of Europe would be transferred to the Mission in Brussels, and the embassy in Paris would allow three of its positions to be transferred to Brussels to cover the additional work. Of course, nobody consulted me about any of this.

Well, I thought this was a bid mistake and I made by feelings known in a dissent channel message to Washington. I was surprised by how many other posts and personages in the European Bureau agreed with me. But having their support apparently was not enough to turn this train around. When word leaked out from Washington about the Post closing plans, the city of Strasbourg became very upset. They immediately undertook an important public relations campaign in Washington and hired some high powered lobbyists to support their position. Strasbourg was already in a major international battle to keep their designation as the seat of the European Parliament, which wanted to move permanently to Brussels. They weren't going to allow this happen, and they certainly didn't want to see the United States also pulling the rug from under them on the importance of Strasbourg as a European capital, or of the Council of Europe as a European Institution.



Strasbourg found many important allies in the U.S. Congress. The Congress, which already knew Strasbourg well because of its historical importance and because of their relations with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, began to question of the wisdom of the State Department's decision to include the Strasbourg Consulate in the list to be closed. It was in this context that Senator Fritz Hollings from North Carolina, during a visit to Strasbourg that summer made the point to tell me personally, "Vic, They will close the Strasbourg Consulate over my dead body. I helped to liberate Strasbourg. I know how important it is." This same strong reaction was shared by a number of Senators. In fact, one article in the Washington Post ran an article on the issue entitled "Senators Helms and Pell Finally Agree!" They both agreed that the Congress should act to keep the Strasbourg Consulate open. Amendments were placed in the State Department Appropriations which made this reaction clear. The amendments provided that if Strasbourg was closed, no new diplomatic posts could be established until Strasbourg was reopened. In the end, the State Department backed down and Strasbourg was never closed. But, this issue took about a year to resolve. Let me add a postscript. Our consulates in Lyon and Bordeaux were eventually closed, and then reopened several years later at great additional expense to the U.S. taxpayers.

There were many in Washington and Paris who blamed me for the Congressional reactions. I also was criticized heavily for my dissent message which, I might say was leaked by others, not me. This all lead to need for me to file a grievance concerning my subsequent treatment by the Department regarding this issue. I won that grievance. But it certainly cost me several years in my own career. It became a serious handicap I had to overcome.

Q: How did you find the embassy in Paris? In a way you were technically under them but your job was really quite different. How did they relate to you?

COMRAS: It took some working together to figure out the right relationship between the Consulate and Paris and between the Consulate and Brussels. In the beginning, Ambassador Joe Rogers did not understand the role the consulate played in terms of the European institutions. He was focused on his own assets in France. He understood the role of the consulates in Lyon, Bordeaux and Marseilles. They were outposts of the Embassy and provided some limited traditional consular and trade services. The post in Strasbourg was different. It didn't seem to do as much in these areas as the other consulates did. So, for him, the Strasbourg consulate was less important.

It was hard to change his attitude in this regard. But, he did come around eventually to seeing the importance of Strasbourg to U.S. interests.



I don't want to underplay the role our Consulate did play vis a vis our bilateral relations with France. Our consular district represented an important part of France, including Alsace, Lorraine, Franche-Compte, and Belfort. The consulate covered the political and economic happenings in this region and reported on them regularly. You know, all the consulates in France were important outposts. They served a very important function in following, and influencing, what was happening in France.

Jacobinism in France had centralized authority over all of France in Paris. But, France was still ruled largely from the interior. The French political system allows for politicians to carry several political mandates simultaneously. Every French politician was also, first and most, a local politician. He was also a mayor, Local counselor, leader of the provincial regional assembly. That was his political base. Almost all of these political features were only part time residents in Paris. Their homes were in the regions and provinces. They spent only a few days a week in Paris. And when they were in Paris they were very very busy. It was very difficult for the embassy to establish any close relationship with them. Rather, the embassy had to deal mostly with the senior bureaucracy which ran the country under the guidance of the political leadership.

Ironically, the Consulates had closer relations with many of these political figures than the embassy. The embassy never wanted to admit this, but it was pretty much so. They might meet the politicians in their offices for short meetings, or, at most over Lunch. The ambassador might also get them to a reception or a formal dinner. But in the provinces we got to know them at home, and with their families, and mostly in informal setting. These were settings when they were "local politicians," catering to their local constituency and political base. I got to know many of them well, and on a first name basis. Over time, Joe Rogers began to understand this, perhaps more even than some of his predecessors.

Q: How were your contacts at the Council of Europe? Did you have to be careful you weren't getting crosswise from our embassy in Brussels dealing in European affairs?

COMRAS: Strasbourg was a unique situation. It was a small post with a big agenda little understood in Washington or Brussels. That gave me quite a bit of independence. I reported what I thought important. I gave Washington, Brussels and Paris my best shot in interpreting events. I contributed to our dialogue with Europe and our understanding of Europe. I made friends and influenced people - more on the European side than in Washington. I was an activist.

I took a very active stance vis a vis the Council of Europe and integrated our post into the activities conducted by the 21 other European Missions to the Council of Europe (all of which were headed by an Ambassador). I became the ex-officio representative of the United States to the Council of Europe even though we weren't members.



I had a great number of frustrations in getting my points across to Washington, and I sometimes had considerable difficulties in getting Washington to follow through on its commitments, or on activities related to the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, I was able to keep my credibility with the COE, with Washington, Brussels and Paris. Some of the people in all of these quarters didn't always appreciate me. I made my own bunch of critics, but that went with the territory. But I guess I must have done a good job as I received a nomination and favorable mention in the Director General's Best reporting competition, I received a Superior Honor Award from the Department, and I received the President's Medal from the Council of Europe.

While I was in Strasbourg we got involved in a large number of intergovernmental activities under the auspices of the Council of Europe. I took great pride in the role of the Consulate in setting up the Strasbourg Conference on Parliamentary Democracy. I also met regularly with the members of the Committee of Ministers that ran the Council of Europe. I used these occasions to make sure they were aware of, and considered U.S. views on relevant issues. These included issues related to Yugoslavia, for example, or to Turkey. I was very much involved in advocating the reintegration of Turkey into the Council of Europe after it returned to civilian rule. This was pursuant to U.S. government policy. I also reflected U.S. positions vis-à-vis the situation in Romania at the time of the Ceaucescu and his destruction of the center of historic Bucharest. I handled numerous issues related to computer technology and computer privacy law, attempts to limit the importation of American film and TV programming, and many other related trade issues. I was deeply involved in numerous human rights questions, and proceedings at the European Commission and Court of Human Rights. This included one case where the United States was seeking the extradition of a person to Virginia to stand trial for murder. The case before the European Court of Human Rights dealt with the death penalty, and whether it violated that person's human rights to extradite him to a country which could execute him, or hold him for long periods under the threat of execution (the so-called Death Row Syndrome). There were a whole range of issues.

There were also the normal grist of political comings and goings, including visits by numerous U.S. government officials and a great many congressmen and senators.

I did a lot on the parliamentary side. This included the Strasbourg Parliamentary Conference on Democracy, which was a common effort between the U.S. Congress and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. This work included discussions and plans to foster democracy in Eastern European countries that were beginning to show some liberalization in the Gorbachev period.



Strasbourg also was a place for exercising a multiplier effect regarding getting U.S. points across. A large number of European parliamentarians and European Government officials were in Strasbourg at any particular time. We had a number of good opportunities to meet with these officials and to get our points across. I wanted the Consulate to play as large a role as we could on public diplomacy. I think the State Department should have given us more resources for this effort.

I want to tell you that my Wife Sara played a very very important role in this public relations effort. And she did so without the resources and support she should have gotten for the work. She was truly an unpaid volunteer employee of the U.S. government every day we were in Strasbourg. She provided the settings for so many successful occasions when we could entertain and get to know French leaders and European leaders. She was also always by my side at the very numerous occasions we attended special events and functions. She was an additional translator and interpreter. She was a scheduler and a planner. She provided an enormous service to U.S. interests and the U.S. government. She was busy working alongside me, or on the home front every day.

One cannot understate the important role that principal officer's wives or spouses play. This is particularly the case in small posts. My wife was among the best of these. She established a glowing reputation as a hostess and guest, and as one who gave a volunteer hand whenever and wherever needed. I do believe that she made a greater impact in Strasbourg than I did.

I can understand completely the efforts made by Mrs. Eagleburger to obtain some official recognition and compensation for spouses that work so hard for the United States with little or no recognition or compensation.

Q: I would think that the parliamentarians would be quite approachable because it wasn't as though they were sitting in the middle of their constituency and all that. In other words, they were somewhat fish out of water, too, weren't they, being in Strasbourg?

COMRAS: Absolutely. Strasbourg provided a very good setting in which to establish such relationships, to get to know the parliamentarians. I do believe that some of the conversations I had with members of parliament found their way back into their national parliament discussions. I believe I helped, in some cases, in broadening their understanding of certain issues, and U.S. views on them. You know these parliamentarians also produced a large amount of material during their participation in European Parliament and Parliamentary Assembly sessions that provide some useful and interesting insights into European popular thinking and attitudes toward current affairs issues. I tried to keep abreast of these discussions and, when appropriate to use them to report back to Washington on relevant issues. I think I got some very good insights on European attitudes towards various economic, political, social problems that were also of interest to us.



You know, the Council of Europe was the first international forum to put together a legal convention on the suppression of terrorism. We took great interest in those discussions. They laid down the principle that terrorism crimes should not benefit from the so-called political crimes exception to extradition. Q: I was talking to someone else who was saying that the Europeans had played this dangerous game of allowing terrorists, if they were working on their home country's soil but doing their nasty stuff to somebody else, they weren't taking them very seriously. In other words, as long as you're not blowing up my people, we'll arrest you but we're not going hard after you. Things came to change after a while.

COMRAS: Well, I know that just about all the Western European countries took terrorism seriously during the last half of the 1980s. Terrorists were very active in Europe during that period. There was a terrible wave of terrorism throughout Western Europe. It cost the life of our Military Attache in Paris, Colonel Ray. It almost killed our DCM. Bob Homme, my predecessor,, was shot. Our military attaché in Athens was killed. We saw active terrorism throughout Europe - street bombings, train bombings, shootings. These occurred all over the place, Italy, Greece, Germany, France, Spain, Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium. No country seemed able to escape this terrorism. I think the Europeans learned during this period to take terrorism very seriously. I hope they have not forgotten the lessons they learned in that period.

Q: In '89, where did you go?

COMRAS: My next assignment after Strasbourg was Ottawa, Canada. I was assigned a Minister Counselor for Science and Technology.

Q: You were there from '89 to when?



COMRAS: I was there for just about a year. From the summer of 1989 to the summer of 1990. Ottawa was not my first choice. In fact, I have planned on the assignment. I was left cold during the bidding process, after having tried to get another Principal Officers Job in either Bermuda or Belfast. At the time I was not very popular with the European Bureau front office. They thought me too independent, especially since I had run against them on the Strasbourg closing issue. I guess they didn't come out looking so good on that one and they blamed me. They were upset with the dissent message I filed and the fact that it leaked. In fact, I had to wait until the change of administration in Washington and a new EUR front office before I could get any onward assignment in the European Bureau. It was not that I didn't have the support of the most of the rank and file. It was that I didn't have the support of the front office itself. When the front office changed, several of my colleagues in Washington pushed hard for me to get a good onward assignment within the bureau. It appeared that the science counselor in Ottawa might be the right job. It looked like a busy enough job at the time with acid rain negotiations going on and clear air a major bone of contention between Canada and the United States. I'm afraid it didn't turn out as busy or important a position as I hoped it would be. My predecessor was the first to get the Minister Counselor designation. But, in fact the job didn't merit that rank or title. And it didn't keep it for long. There are a number of reasons for this.

Q: I would think the business relations and everything were so close.

COMRAS: Right. Our embassy in Ottawa is a strange bird. It is an embassy having difficulty understanding its role. And that's because the relationship between Washington and Ottawa is so close and so strong. There was almost no need for an embassy. And the Canadian Embassy in Washington kind of usurped the main role of communicator between Washington and Ottawa, anyway. There didn't seem room for both embassies to play that role. The Canadian embassy in Washington was much much bigger in size, and had direct access to the highest levels in the Foreign Office and Prime Ministers Office. The Embassy in Ottawa worked through an office in Washington that was, in many respects an adjunct within the Office of European Affairs.

As I said, the relations between Ottawa and Washington were very close. Much of the business between the capitals was conducted directly, through simple phone calls, or through personal visits. It was just so easy for officials in both capitals to talk with each other directly. There was really no need for an intermediary. The Officials in one agency knew their counterparts in the other country well, and on a first name basis. They did not change as often as those assigned to the embassy. This was particularly the case in the areas involving science and technology. Having an attaché<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> for science and technology in Ottawa made as much sense as having an attaché<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in Chicago. The scientific and technical agencies and communities worked so closely together already. Scientists moved freely between the two countries. In fact many worked in each others countries. And these people knew a lot more about the technical and scientific issues that were of concern to them, than I ever could.



When somebody in Environment Canada wanted to talk to somebody in EPA, they got on the phone and talked directly. When those interested in space station issues wanted to talk about space station issues they spoke directly - the Canadian space agency directly with NASA. People from the U.S. government agencies would often visit Ottawa without even telling the embassy they were coming or that they were there. In fact, they never bothered the embassy. They just came and went. We might find out about it later, or we might not.

The United States never seemed to treat Canada with the same urgency or level of interest that the Canadian government took vis a vis the United States. Most of the issues appeared to be one-way. I guess the Canadians had a much greater need to try and influence decisions in Washington than the U.S. had to influence decisions in Ottawa. I learned that again first hand when, later, I became the Director of the Office of Canadian Affairs. But that comes much later in my oral history.

All this is to say that the embassy in Ottawa had a particularly hard time understanding and fulfilling its role.

Also, I probably was not fully suited to be a Science Counselor. My background was a legal one, not a scientific one. Of course I had a good foundation in high technology that came from my COCOM years. Yet, advances in science and technology had probably passed me by.

Shortly after I arrived in Ottawa the post underwent a major inspection cycle. The inspectors began asking hard questions about the role and function of the embassy. And they had a lot of hard questions to ask of me - What did I do. How did I do it. How successful was I. What additional support did I need. What were my most important duties and my least important duties, etc. I guess it dawned on the inspectors pretty quickly that my position was marginal and over-ranked. In fact, my most exciting responsibilities seemed to be associated with making hotel and meeting reservations, and accompanying visiting dignitaries. I think they decided wisely to recommend that the position be downgraded and integrated into the Embassy's economic section. That's where it had been before my predecessor was given his vaulted title.

The Embassy fought these recommendations tooth and nail. But, for me, the writing was on the wall. I needed to move on at the first opportunity - particularly if I wanted to remain competitive for promotion and advancement. Also, I just found the job BORING.



About that same time I received some encouragement from friends in Washington to put my name up for election as chairman of the Open Forum. The Open Forum had been an important institution for creative and alternative thinking in the Department of State for decades. It had played an important role in channeling constructive dissent and allowing for internal policy debate. But, it had declined in the late 1980s and was on the verge of disappearing. My friends suggested that I was the perfect person to reinvigorate the institution and win its renewal. I decided to accept the challenge. I won the election by an absolute landslide. In fact I got just about all the votes. Now I needed the Embassy to release me so that I could take up what is one of the very few elected positions in the State Department. With the Ambassador's permission, I curtailed in Ottawa and went back to Washington to be the chairman of the Open Forum from summer of '90 to '91. I think the Ambassador was happy to see me go.

Q: Sticking to Canada, people who served in Canada talk often about having to deal with the great sensitivity of Canadians to American relations where Americans really don't think about Canadian relations. Did you run across this?

COMRAS: Oh, yes. Canada is much more aware of American attitudes, feelings, prejudices, and policies than Americans are aware of the Canadians. Canadians enjoy being our closest neighbors and being able to travel to and through the United States. They enjoy crossing the border to buy products in the United States. They enjoy being able to move freely in the United States and to be accepted mostly as if they were American. But, they also enjoy being able to define themselves differently than Americans. They like their cake and want to eat it, too. They are often resentful that Americans take them for granted. But all that aside, we're truly brothers. Although we can have our little spats and differences, and differences of interest and view on certain economic, political and cultural issues, it's a bond that's so deep that there is no threat to it coming undone.

Q: In your position was the groundwork being laid for a free trade agreement between Canada and the United States? How was that seen?

COMRAS: This was an active period for many of my embassy colleagues that were working on bringing NAFTA about. The Embassy was engaged mostly in trying to explain NAFTA to special groups in both countries. But NAFTA was a harder sell in the United States than in Canada. Certain Canadian groups had concerns, but never were in a position to thwart an eventual agreement.

I'd like to get back to Canada a little later in the interview. You see, my real involvement with Canadian Affairs came later, when I served as the Director of the Office of Canadian Affairs 1998 until late 1999.



Q: We'll come back to that. Let's pick up the Open Forum. Describe what the Open Forum was. What was the state of it and what happened while you were doing this?

COMRAS: The Open Forum was created during the Vietnam War. The idea of an Open Forum grew out of the difficulties many Foreign Service Officers had with U.S. policies at that time. Many Foreign Service Officers had doubts about the Vietnam War and the policies we were pursuing in support of the War. There was no channel for dissent. The only course open to Foreign Service Officers was to go outside the system, or to resign and go public.

The Open Forum was created to provide an alternative way of dissenting within the Service and giving the Secretary of State, and the Administration an opportunity to gain the benefit (and there were benefits to be gained) from the alternative ideas and perspectives that were not fully in accord with the current policies.

Providing a channel for Foreign Service, and other State Department professionals to vent their differences with policy, within confidential confines, also provided a way for them to disavow the war and continue to contribute in our foreign policy in other areas. They didn't have to resign or forfeit their career to let the Administration know they did not support the Vietnam War or the way in which it was being conducted.

Both Secretaries Dean Rusk and Henry Kissinger understood that should be able to stimulate free discussion and debate on foreign policy issues within the institution and benefit from broader criticism and thinking about foreign policy, particularly if this was kept as an in-house activity.

This was the concept behind the creation of the Open Forum. At first the Open Forum was amorphous. Over time it took a more formal shape. It was established as a separate function within the State Department. A position was created for an elected Chairman. The term of election was one year. All State Department employees could participate in the election. The Open Forum Office was also attached to the Office of Policy Planning within the Secretariat of the Department of State. This would allow ideas or dissent generated to be reviewed and considered by the Secretary's staff charged with foreign policy thinking.

In time the Open Forum began to publish a confidential in house journal to reflect interesting and alternative thinking on foreign policy issues. It sponsored in house discussion sessions and hosted outside experts and speakers.



The Open Forum was also given responsibility for organizing and monitoring the dissent channel within the State Department. All dissent messages had to be sent directly to the Secretary State with a copy to the Open Forum Chairman. The Secretary had sole discretion regarding any further distribution of the dissent message. It became practice to delegate this authority to the Director of the Office of Policy Planning. The role of the Open Forum Chairman was to assure that the Dissent message received adequate consideration and response. The Open Forum Chairman was also responsible to ensure that the dissenter was adequately protected within this process.

By 1988/'89, the Open Forum had lost most of its energy and presence. It had become little more than a speakers program. It was engaged in only very few issues, and was viewed as irksome by many on the seventh floor. Some of the speakers were viewed as inappropriate, particularly in the run-up to the Iraq War. The journal was no longer published and Open Forum discussion sessions rarely held. The Open Forum was in crisis, and serious consideration was being given to abolishing the position of Open Forum Chairman. That would have brought the institution to an end.

I was delighted with the strong support I received from my State Department colleagues to take on the chairman job. I felt I had a mandate from my colleagues to restore the prestige and bona fides of the Open Forum. It was a challenge I welcomed.

I am very proud of my record as Open Forum Chairman. I restored the Journal and established a series of working groups on various current foreign policy topics. I became an active contributor at the Policy Planning Staff meetings. I also reinvigorated the Speakers program. I left the Open Forum much stronger than when I received it.

I am particularly proud of the discussion panels and the Open Forum Journal. These became vehicles for drawing on the experience and expertise of our Foreign Service and other State Department professionals. It provided a channel to gain advantage of their knowledge and views even when their assignments were in other functions or areas. There is a lot of experience out there. An officers experiences and contributions shouldn't be limited only to his current job function. He should have the means to share his views and expertise in other areas as well. And all of us should be able to benefit from his experience and thinking.



It would be a shame not to be able to draw upon our own brainpower because our system limits their contribution only to the area or function to which they are currently assigned. As you know we change jobs in the Department and overseas every few years. When we are reassigned our previous experiences risks becoming irrelevant. If you served in the Balkans and then are transferred to Canadian Affairs, people will come and talk to you only about Canadian Affairs. Nobody seems interested any more on your views concerning the Balkans. That's crazy. Your experience in the Balkans should make you a permanent member of the State Department's Balkan brain trust. If your willing, you should be able to contribute to these issues as needed. Why should we limit our Balkan brain trust to only those currently assigned to that function?

I believe that the Open Forum can still provide a forum to allow the Department to draw on its in-house expertise, particularly in times of crisis. I favor the creation and maintenance of informal policy working groups and committees that might be able to contribute to the work of the Policy Planning Office. These are the types of projects I sought to undertake with a team of volunteers that helped me during my chairmanship. I think it worked out well.

Q: Were there any issues that particularly stuck in your mind?

COMRAS: Oh, there were many. First there was the invasion of Kuwait and the run-up to the Gulf War. There was a great debate during this period concerning the use and efficacy of economic sanctions, and whether enough time had been given for sanctions to work an effect. There was the debate over whether or not to engage in military action. There was the issue of the status of the Kurds. The Open Forum engaged in discussions on all of these topics.

The Open Forum also got into the policy debates on the Middle East and the potential for rapprochement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Under my tutelage, the Open Forum brought together, for the first time, The Directors of the American Jewish Congress and the American Palestinian Organization. This was the first time the two directors met each other face to face. It was the first time they shared the same platform. It was the first time they ate lunch together. It was the first they discussed the middle east directly between themselves. That's a lot of firsts! And I think the State Department audience benefitted greatly from their exchanges.

The Open Forum brought the Kurdish leadership in to speak to the Department for the first time. By inviting them as Open Forum Speakers, the Department was able to benefit from any needed deniability concerning hosting them. This was another benefit of the Open Forum. We were an independent group. What we did was not official government policy or activities.

Q: Did you find that this aroused a certain amount of geographic bureaus' hostility?



COMRAS: Oh, yes. I am sometimes surprised by the parochial or narrow views held by some of my colleagues. Fortunately, most of us are able to overcome such tendencies. We did receive complaints from some in the geographic bureaus, But we had good protectors in Dennis Ross and William Burns, the Director and Deputy Director of the Office of Policy Planning.

Bill Burns, now our assistant secretary for Middle East Affairs, was then the deputy director of the Office of Policy Planning. Our Israel expert, Dennis Ross, was the Director of Policy Planning. Dennis was a good friend of the Open Forum. He made us part of the Policy Planning team. We attended the staff meetings and could channel in through that process a number of things that we were doing and working on and had concerns about. Although some in the bureaus resented some of the things that we were doing, the Policy Planning Office made us a real part of their approach.

Q: In '91, whither?

COMRAS: It came time to be reassigned again. I departed the Open Forum with the hopes that my successor would take the same interest I did. Ruefully, that was not the case. But, now is not the time for that story.

I was assigned as Director of the Office of East-West Trade in the Economic Business Bureau. As I told you earlier, I had a unique background in east west trade regulation. However, my reassignment to the Office of East West Trade was going to pose new challenges for me. This was a different period in our history. The cold war had come to an end. The Berlin Wall had fallen. Our east west trade policies were changing along with the fundamental change in east west relations.

East-west trade before 1990 meant trade with the Communist bloc countries and non-market economies. Almost all of these countries and their economies were now in transition. Our challenge was to know what was going on in these marketplaces, and to adapt to the new situation. There were still many remnants of our old COCOM policies. High technology dual use items were still considered sensitive for national security purposes.

Our first task was to help formulate new policies and trade controls more suited to the new circumstances. We also had a new set of issues to deal with regarding the implementation of the other trade regulations that come into play with increased bilateral trade. In addition, our office took on new responsibilities for the implementation of economic and trade sanctions. Our past experience with Security and Foreign Policy Trade controls made us the logical site for dealing with economic sanctions questions. I always like to think of sanctions as a very complex set of coercive diplomatic, political and economic measures that can be used as levers to further our national security and foreign policy goals.



I served as the Director of the Office of East-West Trade at the time the office moved away from dealing with bloc economies, and began to rethink our export control environment, and began to deal with economic sanctions as a new approach in support of our foreign policy.

Q: Iraq wasn't part of the equation, was it?

COMRAS: Oh, yes. Our office was very business with the Iraq Sanctions Program. The Gulf War was over, and economic sanctions had settled in to keep the pressure on Saddam Hussein. The Gulf war began in February of '91. It was over by the summer of '91. The complex situation in the aftermath posed numerous difficult issues as we sought to retain pressure on the Saddam Regime. They were tied to disarmament, reparations, disposal of Weapons of Mass Destruction, compliance with all UN resolutions, and human rights issues. During this period we began to set up a new control regime under the auspices of the United Nations to deal with post-war issues. These included arranging for compensation, the Oil for Food Program, equitable food distribution, weapons inspection and other related issues.

Our office was also deeply engaged in the application of sanctions on Libya in the aftermath of Pan Am 109 and with Haiti sanctions applied to reverse the overthrow of Aristide. The Office also took on the first steps related to sanctions applied to Yugoslavia with the outbreak of conflict in that region.

As events in Yugoslavia deteriorated through 1991 and 1992 the Yugoslav sanctions began to take up bigger and bigger blocks of our time.

The United States initially viewed Yugoslavia's disintegration as a European issue - an issue to be resolved by the European countries among themselves. The United States would support whatever measures the EU decided to take vis a vis the growing Yugoslav crisis. For our part we wanted to see Yugoslavia remain united. We were concerned about the possible implications for Russia after the collapse of communism. We believed that the European ought to carry the main burden when it came to Yugoslavia. Whatever measures they would take, we would reinforce. Our office worked to help develop appropriate policies consistent with these European measures. But the Europeans didn't seem to be able to get their act together. Germany broke ranks and recognized the secession of Slovenia. Then Croatia broke away. Serbia sought to intervene militarily and precipitated a new round of Balkan wars.



There was a dramatic change in U.S. policy in early spring 1992. Matters had gotten well out of hand in the Balkans. Serbian soldiers were slaughtering civilians in Croatia, and were bombarding civilian centers. Bosnia also withdrew from the Yugoslav Federation and a new Balkan war was engaged. The Europeans were not able to come to grips with these problems, or to adopt meaningful measures to deal with them. One could sense the annoyance, outrage and anger Secretary James Baker felt as he tried to deal with his European colleagues at the Lisbon Conference in April 1992. He realized that our standing by the Europeans in support of their ineffective measures was not going to resolve anything. The Europeans were just not able to deal with this issue and simply standing behind them was not getting us anywhere. So, at the close of the Lisbon conference he directed a dramatic reversal in American foreign policy. We got out of the back seat and into the front seat. Baker decided to take the Yugoslav problem out of the sole hands of the European Union and put it with the UN Security Council. In May 1992 the U.S. proposed that the Security Council adopt a strong resolution imposing severe diplomatic and economic sanctions on Serbia, as well as an arms embargo on the whole region. He hoped that additional pressure on Serbia might lead to greater impetus for an end to the fighting.

The United Nations Security Council passed resolution 757 on May 30, 1992 imposing a range of diplomatic, trade and financial sanctions on Serbia. But by August 1992 trade with Serbia had, in fact increased, rather than diminish. The sanctions appeared to be completely ineffective.

Meanwhile, James Baker had to deal with another crisis - a domestic political crisis - President Bush's feckless reelection campaign. Baker was called away from the State Department to take over the White House Chief of Staff position and to work on reinvigorating Bush's campaign. Lawrence Eagleburger, who was then Deputy Secretary became the Acting Secretary of State. Things were also going bad in the Yugoslav war. Fighting was erupting on new fronts and charges of atrocities were multiplying. Pressure was mounting in Europe and the United States to take some new actions to quell the violence and deal with the reported atrocities. Our policies on these issues were far from clear. As I noted earlier, we wanted to keep the Europeans out in front and keep this as their main responsibility. We were going to be supportive, but the main role had to be a European role. Once again the Europeans seemed unequal to the task.

The European Union decided to convene a Conference in London on August 19, 1992 - the so-called London Conference on the Former Yugoslavia, to deal with the growing crisis. The conference was to be hosted by the British Foreign Minister jointly with UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali. Foreign Ministers from most of the OECD countries attended. The U.S. delegation was led by Acting Secretary Eagleburger. The principal Balkan leaders, including Slobodan Milosevic, were also in attendance. The tried to create a framework for a peaceful settlement process with regard the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, as well as future peaceful relations in the Balkans.



A secondary agenda for the Conference was to get the European act together regarding effective measures to deal with the Yugoslav crisis. Eagleburger insisted that this include developing a sanctions program on Serbia that had some real teeth.

I was not originally designated to be a member of our delegation. That role was given to my boss, the EB Bureau Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Trade Controls. At the last minute, for family reasons, he was unable to go. I was added to the delegation in his place at the very last minute. In fact, there was no place for me on Eagleburgers plane so I had to fly separately to London commercially.

The London Conference ended up having an enormous impact on my career in the State Department. It was one seminal events for me that altered my career significantly.

Q: Before we get to that, one of the major issues on the sanctions, particularly no arms going in there meant that the Serbs had any arms. They didn't need any. They had been stockpiling for decades. The Bosnians didn't have arms. It meant that by calling for sanctions, we were turning this predator, the Serbs, loose on an unarmed victim, Bosnia.

COMRAS: I would prefer to discuss this point a little later. It goes right to the heart of President Clintons policies toward Yugoslavia, especially the policy that became know as "lift and strike."

Q: Sure.

COMRAS: So, let me lay out a little background regarding the atmosphere surrounding the London Conference. In August 1992 war was waging in both Croatia and Bosnia. Slovenia had kicked out the Yugoslav Army and was already operating as a separate country. Macedonia had also just pulled out of the Yugoslav federation, which was composed, at this point, of only Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia soldiers were assisted the Bosnian Serbs in Bosnia. Croats and Bosnians were also fighting each other. Serbia was also at war with Croatia.

Serbians, which account for a majority of all Yugoslavs before the breakup, were now minorities in both Bosnia and Croatia. However, the Yugoslav army which was made up mostly of Serbs, was now controlled by Milosevic. He was allied with the Bosnia Serb leader, RadovaKaradzic. The Serbs were implicated in many of the reported atrocities and were considered the aggressor in both Bosnia and Croatia. However, Croats and Bosnians were also alleged to have committed similar atrocities.



The measures taken, to that date, to restore peace had been ineffective. The greatest blame was believed to lie on the shoulders of the Serbs and Bosnian Serbs. The London Conference was convened on August 19th to grapple with these problems, and to provide a roadmap for peaceful resolution. At the same time the conference provided a forum in which the Europeans and Americans could decide on common policies to pressure the Yugoslav parties into accepted a formula for peace.

As I noted earlier, I joined the delegation at the last minute. My role was to support our efforts to strengthen the sanctions against Serbia, and to give them some teeth. The lead on this issue was initially given to the Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs, John Bolton.

Eagleburger called our delegation together to hold a preconference meeting the night before the opening session. The meeting was held in a conference room in the Churchill Hotel where our delegation was staying. He opened the meeting with the suggestion that we make this meeting a "rough elbow session." That was his way of saying to everyone that he wanted them to feel free to air their ideas and views without worrying about annoying him or anyone else. This was characteristic of Eagleburger. He wanted to hear from anybody who had anything meaningful to say on the issues before us. Almost immediately he turned the discussion to sanctions and what could be done to give them some teeth.

John Bolton began the discussion with a set piece on what IO was doing to strengthen the sanctions in the UN Security Council. He said that we needed to make it clear to all countries that if they do not abide by the sanctions, the United States would "name and shame" them in the Security Council. Given that most of Serbia's trading partners were the European countries themselves, and our political allies, I didn't think that was really going to happen, or to have any major impact on strengthening the sanctions. Just before coming to London, our UN delegation had raised issues in the Security Council concerning increased trade between Italy and Serbia. The Italian government almost went ballistic. They called back their Ambassador from Washington for Consultations and indicated to Washington just how angry they were with such a discussion in the Security Council. After all, they said, Italy was doing more than anyone else in trying to stop such trade, which, under the current sanctions, was nearly impossible to do. No, I didn't think this was a plausible policy or that it would result in a more effective sanctions regime on Serbia.

I knew that the political costs of using the Security Council to embarrass countries into abiding by the sanctions was not going to have the effect we intended. I guess that by nature I am an outspoken person. So, I raised my hand after Bolton's presentation. I was all the way in the back of the room and I really didn't expect Eagleburger to call on me. But, to my surprise he did. And to my surprise, I said straight out that I disagreed with John Bolton's approach. I went ahead to suggest a very different approach



I argued that the problem with the Sanctions was not a political problem, and did not call for a political response. Rather, the issue should be understood as a customs and trade control problem. It wasn't countries that we needed to hold accountable, it was the individuals and companies that we needed to dissuade from violating sanctions. If we were successful in discouraging traders from violating sanctions we would get greater cooperation from all countries to assuring that these measures were applied evenly.

We should recognize, I said that what we are really need to make sanctions work, are effective border controls. This should not be a high stakes political issues. What was needed was a system that could identify the goods that were being transported into, and out of Serbia, and who was moving them. This information could be sent back to the national authorities, not to embarrass them, but to get them to take the necessary steps with good information at hand, to place penalties on those violating the sanctions measures. We should treat sanctions busting as a customs smuggling problem, not a high political issue problem.

I suggested that we work in London to establish a mechanism that could monitoring the flow of goods across borders into Yugoslavia. These monitors would be able to distinguish between UN approved shipments, and those passing in violations of the sanctions. They would verify documentation and cargoes, as well as the trucks and material being sent into Serbia. This information would be passed back to national authorities to determine if such shipments had been approved. The monitors would establish paper trail proof that could be used by regulatory and enforcement agencies against the companies or individuals responsible. The application of severe penalties would then serve to dissuade such trade. And, even if it did not halt it altogether, would drive the price up considerably.

I suggested also that we work to gain agreement to establish a system of international customs monitors in the countries bordering Serbia that would provide the vital information necessary to make this system work. I also made a number of other suggestions as to how we should organize such an international sanctions monitoring system. Many of these ideas had stemmed from discussions I had had with my own office staff concerning how sanctions might be made more effective. I guess I spoke pretty eloquently. I guess I was having one of those good reflective moments. Anyway, Eagleburger looked at me - he didn't even know who I was - and he stopped for a minute and said nothing. Then he pointed to me and said, "I agree with him. I agree with what he just said." Then he turned to me and said, "You, What's your name. I'm putting you in charge of the sanctions here. I want you to negotiate just what you said. Keep me apprized moment by moment, day by day. Every afternoon, I want a full report." That's what he said. And that's what I did. I was able to gain agreement at the London Conference for a new system of controls and for the creation on a new organization that took on the name. Sanctions Assistance Mission. (also known as SAMS).



The Sanctions Assistant Missions were composed of an international corps of customs officers assigned by various countries. At one point we had some 20 countries providing customs officers for the program. They grew in both composition and complexity over the next several years. It gave us full transparency around the borders of Serbia on the borders with Serbia of what was moving in and out. Working with customs officials in the bordering countries, and through a communications center established in Brussels, this information was passed to countries of origin and countries of destination. There was also a secure link with the United Nations to validate approved shipment licenses. A special team was established to monitor trade along the Danube. The sanctions on Serbia became the most successful trade sanctions in history.

Of course, all of this didn't happen overnight, but the new system was set in motion by agreement at the London Conference. In retrospect, that may have been the most useful result to come out of the London Conference.

I don't want to make it sound that the negotiations to establish this new sanctions mechanism were smooth or easy. The contrary was very true. There was enormous opposition to the plan I was trying to sell at the conference. And Secretary Eagleburger had to weigh in on several occasions to provide the negotiating leverage and credibility I needed to put it through. At one point he even threatened to leave the conference early if we didn't get the agreement we were seeking on an effective sanctions monitoring mechanism.

The British joined with us quickly in supporting the SAM concept. Apparently, they had considered some similar ideas and liked what we were proposing. We faced strong opposition, however, from the representative of Boutros Ghali. The UN Secretariat did not at all like the idea of a SAM mechanism operating outside the UN Secretariat framework. They wanted to manage any sanctions mechanisms that were created. However, that would have made the operation subject to forces that could easily dissipate the effort. We wanted it outside UN supervision.

Supervision of the SAMS was one of the most difficult bones of contention. The UN wanted it under the UN, the Europeans wanted it under the EU, the Russians wanted it under the OSCE. We wanted it to operate independently.

As I said the Europeans wanted the SAMS to be under the EU framework and were willing to pledge considerable resources to support the group. When I brought this idea to Eagleburger he shot it down immediately. "We're not members of the EU, he said to me harshly. "I'll be damned if this is going to be an EU project. No! Can't work! Find another solution." So, we went back to the drawing boards and tried to come up with something else that would get everybody we needed on board.



UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali absolutely refused to go along with the SAMS idea. He did not want any international enforcement system to operate outside of the context of the control of the Security Council and the United Nations. That was a major stumbling block until Eagleburger authorized me to tell the representative of Boutros Ghali that this was a walking issue and that if we didn't agree on this, Eagleburger was going to leave the Conference. Of course, Boutros Ghali got on the phone very quickly with Larry Eagleburger and we got what we wanted. We put together a unique instrument in international affairs. It was a hybrid organization to be supported by the EU and the OSCE, but beholden to neither. Its operational work would be handled through a communications center in Brussels supported by the EU and linking national customs services. Official reports were to be made regularly to the OSCE and EU, and through the OSCE to the UN Security Council. In the end everybody was happy, except, of course, the Serbs.

As an aside, The first suggestion for the name of the new organization was simply "Sanctions Observers." But somebody quickly pointed out that we would inevitably be called "SOBs!" Sanctions Assistance Missions, SAMs., sounded a lot better. The SAMS developed into a major and very successful operation. And history will judge them a great success, for, more than any other force at play, they brought Milosevic to Dayton.

Q: Where were the problems in the looseness of these sanctions? Who were you catching?

COMRAS: The Sanctions Assistance Monitors identified a considerable amount of smuggling. These activities were handled by middlemen who obtained goods from overseas and tried to smuggle them across the border at huge markups. Often, they would bribe the local customs authorities or border police to look the other way, or to accept bogus documents to cover the nature of the shipment. This is why the monitors were so important. As experienced customs officers they knew when they saw a scam. They looked closely over the shoulders of the local customs authorities. They "suggested" which trucks should be inspected. They verified the documentation. And, they reported all of their findings and suspicions to the national authorities and to the SAMS communication centers in Brussels. When the local customs officers began to take the heat, they backed off and began taking their responsibilities seriously.

The legitimate firms, once it became clear that these sanctions were being enforced, also quickly stood down. They weren't going to be caught violating these sanctions. As legitimate trade slowed, the price of goods moving into Serbia went up. There were huge profits to be made. This created new alternative smuggling efforts which had to be identified and closed down.



The most important commodities under sanctions were oil and gas. But, keeping these commodities out of Serbian hands was a very challenging task. First of all, oil and gas were also critical to Bosnia. The gas pipeline into Bosnia ran through Serbia. Also, how do you stop the flow of oil from coming into Yugoslavia by sea, or along the Danube.

The port of Bar on the Adriatic became a major focus in the effort to cut the flow of oil into Serbia. The profits to be made by running a coastal tanker into Bar full of oil were immense, and even outweighed the cost of abandoning the tanker once its cargo was offloaded. The U.S. put together a Multilateral Interdiction Force on the Adriatic to stop such shipments. They worked closely with the SAMs. They became increasingly effective overtime. But, every once in a while the Serbs were able to get a significant quantity of oil in through Bar.

The Danube posed another major problem. The Danube runs through Serbia and along the Serbia/ Croatia border. In fact, the river runs right through Belgrade. The Danube is an international river covered by its own international Danube Convention. It carries an enormous amount of trade between countries to both the east and west of Serbia. You can't just close the river down. That would hurt the economies of many European countries. The challenge was how to keep goods flowing along the river, but keep them out of Serbian hands?

These issues were enormously complex and difficult to resolve. But, one by one we addressed them. It took considerable time and effort. We didn't always get positive results right away. The results were slow and incremental. Each problem solved seemed to present a new dilemma. The most positive result was the transparency achieved by the customs observers along the borders, and on the Danube, working with the local customs officials. These indicated the problems we faced and the kinds of solutions that were required. They also provided good information that allowed the Security Council, in successive resolutions, to close off the loopholes.

The end result was a very sophisticated monitoring system with secure links to the UN Sanctions Committee and to national customs authorities. With this system in place the Monitors could verify each exception license granted by the UN Sanctions Committee, and the legitimacy of each cargo almost on a real time basis. They could communicate quickly with customs authorities worldwide to obtain information on the bona fides of documentation and the nature of shipments. They could warn national authorities to inspect suspect shipments that might have originated in Serbia. These links were managed by a very sophisticated center in Brussels run by the European Union.



The Sanctions Assistance Missions had the benefit of experienced customs officers from some 20 countries. Since they worked alongside the customs services of the frontline countries, they were able to train and equip the local customs services to do their job properly. This was a clear benefit to all the frontline countries, including Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, Macedonia, and for the Ukraine down river. They got the training and the equipment that they needed to put in place modern customs services.

With the election of Bill Clinton, our policies toward Serbia were placed again in review by the new incoming team. The Clinton Foreign Policy team had pledged during the campaign to reinvigorate our Yugoslav policy. The new Clinton administration began espousing a new policy which they called "lift and strike." I believe that our group helped to further expand that concept to make it a "lift, strike and sanctions" policy.

On February 10, 1993, in one of his first major foreign policy speeches, new Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced this new policy - lift, strike, and sanctions. This involved lifting the arms embargo on Bosnia. Threatening air strikes against the Bosnia Serbs if they opened a new offensive to try and grab more territory, and to apply sanctions against them vigorously. The result, it was hoped would be to strengthen the position of the Bosnians, hold the Bosnian Serbs in place, and weaken them with the sanctions. This would mean that time would be against them and they would agree to finding a peaceful resolution on reasonable terms.

The Arms Embargo had impacted the Bosniacs much more than the Bosnian Serbs. The latter already had the benefit of advanced military weaponry supplied by the former Yugoslav (mostly Serb) army. Plus the Bosnian Serbs were being aided directly by the Serbian Army. Serbia manufactured many of the weapons needed by the Bosnian Serbs for the conflict. On the other hand, the Bosniacs had few sources of obtaining weapons, and even these were being foreclosed by the Arms Embargo. They had to get their weapons covertly, and often from questionable sources, such as Iran.

The new administration wanted to get European Agreement to better arm the Bosniacs and strengthen their ability to fight the Bosnian Serbs.

We were also going to make it clear to the Bosnian Serbs that we would not allow them to take advantage of their superior arms and strength to advance against the Bosniacs. Rather, they were going to have to try and hold on to what they had. If they advanced, we were going to strike.

The third part of the strategy was sanctions. We wanted the Serbs to realize that they had better get to the negotiating table quick, because, overtime their position could only deteriorate.

That was the basic outline of the Lift Strike Sanctions Program.



When Clinton took office he appointed Leon Fuerth, Vice President Gore's Security Advisor, as hiCzar for handling the sanctions aspects of what was to be this new policy. He told Fuerth that he wanted the sanctions to have an impact. He told Fuerth to take full personal responsibility to him as the President to assure that this part of the policy was being implemented effectively.

New in office himself, Leon Feurth called over to the State Department and asked that they send over the person who was handling the Yugoslav sanctions. That was me.

Let me step back and explain. When I came back from the London Conference, Eagleburger called me into his office and told me that I would have line responsibility within the State Department for making sure the new sanctions system we had negotiated in London was working. Of course, I still had to operate within the normal and diffuse State Department bureaucracy. And that meant that everything I did was subject to inter-bureau review and approval. And that process could be stifling.

Anyway, I was asked to go over to Fuerth' office to brief him on the sanctions and the Sanctions Assistance Missions. Leon grilled me extensively about what was going on, on how effective the measures were, what needed to be done, and what could be done better.

That was my first meeting with Leon. We had a very good discussion that went on for several hours. I guess Leon found what I was saying interesting. I remember him telling me, "Vic, I want you to get a paper on my desk by tomorrow afternoon laying out what we talked about out today. I want you to give me a paper on what you think can and should be done and how it should be done. I want your ideas in writing on how we should approach this problem. I know you work for the State Department, but President Clinton has put me in charge of this, and I'm telling you to do this just for me. I don't want your paper circulated around. You don't have to clear it with anyone. It will have no official status. It's just for me." And that's what I did. The next day I gave him the paper he asked for. I had stayed in my office most of the night writing it. I don't know how many State department rules on clearance I must have broken, but I gave him the paper the next day. It was just my own thinking on the issues. It was not a State Department paper.

I guess Fuerth liked the paper, for he called up our new Secretary of State, Warren Christopher and asked him to assign me to a lead a special interagency task force that Fuerth was establishing to handle the sanctions under his direction. He told me later that he gave Christopher two options, either set me up with such a task force in the Department of State or he would turn to the Defense Department to establish its own "Fusion Center" to run the sanctions. Christopher agreed and the next thing I knew I was putting together a new interagency task force that worked directly for Leon Fuerth.



Q: During this time, did you run across... I've been interviewing Peter Galbraith, our Ambassador in Croatia during part of this time. He got taught in this about Islamic arms going to there. He was told to sort of turn a blind eye. Everybody forgot that they told him that and he was left dangling. Did you get caught in this?

COMRAS: This is a fascinating tale worthy of many books - novels and histories.

Let me give you a little background. The Europeans didn't buy into the "Lift and Strike" aspect of our policy. They felt that the introduction of more arms into the area would exacerbate the conflict rather than bring it to an end, that if the Bosniacs got stronger, that would simply make them more intransigent in dealing with some of the issues that had to be negotiated, that we could still apply a significant political pressure on the Serbians and might have a number of other carrots to dangle on Serbia to use its influence to cut back the Bosnian Serbs and that that would be the better route to take. They were opposed to the notion of lifting the arms embargo and providing more arms into this arena of conflict. They were also against the notion of striking. They felt that they were particularly vulnerable with the presence of Spanish, French, British, and other troops under the UN flag in Bosnia that there would be retribution against these soldiers if there was a strike - and we did see some of that subsequently when some of the soldiers were held as hostages at various moments in various contexts. They were not able to sustain or protect themselves in any meaningful way. So the Europeans did not buy into lift and strike. However, they did agree to work to strengthen the application of sanctions. So, sanctions became the centerpiece of our Yugoslav policy for the next two years.

Despite the European rejection of the Lift and Strike, the Clinton Administration was not adverse to seeing the Bosniacs acquire the military equipment they needed to withstand the Bosnian Serb onslaught. So, they agreed to through a blind eye to the Bosnian Governments efforts to acquire weapons.

Q: Were you aware of the lift leakage, of the Muslim arms into Bosnia? (end of tape)

COMRAS: I have my own views, speculations and interpretations as to what went on. I don't know for certain. But I do know what happened with our sanctions policy and how it worked. I played a major role in that area and feel that I have a good story to tell about the sanctions.

Q: There were a lot of operators. There was great concern because the system seemed to be working in favor of the aggressor. What do you do about the Bosniacs? How do you get equipment in there? We'd gone through this with the Contras, all sorts of operations to beef up the so-called "good guys." This gets into intelligence things and all that. Were things going on that you kind of knew about or didn't know about?



In my view, our diplomacy supporting the Lift and Strike approach left much to be desired. I don't know if we could have ever really sold this new approach, but the way we handled it doomed it from the outset.

Europe's cool reception to the ideas in the Christopher Speech should have led us to undertake a series of quiet discussions and group reflection concerning the Administration's new ideas. But, that is not what happened. We turned our effort to win the Europeans over into a major public initiative to get them to rethink their positions. In early April 2003, Secretary Christopher embarked on a very public trip to Europe to discuss Lift and Strike. He was accompanied by the normal planeload of journalists covering the trip. We knew that our proposals were controversial and did not sit well with the Europeans. I think it was a big mistake to send a high profile mission of this kind with the Secretary of State in what had to be a very dicey operation. I don't know who designed that trip, but this has to go down as one of the worst programmed trips that a Secretary of State has ever made in any time. Rather than fly first to the countries where we stood even a small chance of selling our ideas, he went first to the countries that had already expressed their doubts. He should have started, for example, in Germany, which favored our thinking. This might have helped build up some diplomatic momentum behind the concept. Instead, he flew first to Italy, and then to France and Britain. Italy was the last place to start. By the time the plane had landed in Italy, the Italians were talking publicly about their concerns. These were also being played up heavily in the British and French press. By the time the Secretary got into the meetings with the Italians his mission was already in doubt. By the time he left these meetings, Italian opposition was already being leaked to the press. His mission was dead on arrival. Nevertheless, he tried valiantly to rescue it. But there was no hope that it could be salvaged. The press play was so negative that it helped feed the opposition all along his travel route. The trip was eventually cut short and Christopher returned to the United States to the tune of press reports of major discord with our allies and a Yugoslav policy in shambles. The trip turned out to be a great embarrassment to the Clinton Administration.

When the Secretary returned to Washington, the administration started to rethink its whole position on Yugoslavia. If the Europeans didn't like our approach, perhaps we should step back and let them run the show. And that's what happened, except for the sanctions. We decided to put our effort completely behind the sanctions and let the Europeans work out the rest. We would work with them, but not play a leadership role on the other aspects of Yugoslav policy.



Our new policy took shape at the hastily called Washington Conference. We called our European allies, and the Russians to Washington to demonstrate that we continued to work together on the Yugoslav crisis. A new Contact Group including most of the NATO countries and Russia was put together to collegially address Yugoslav matters. While this new formula gave us this collegial cover, it meant that all future decisions would be weighed down by the factor of the lowest common denominator, including Russia's reservations about how we were favoring the Bosnians over the Serbs.

Q: The Russians identified traditionally with the Serbs, fellow Slavs and all that.

COMRAS: I didn't think that the Contact Group was the wisest course for us in dealing with the Yugoslav crisis. While it got us out of an embarrassing situation and provided for a sharing of the political and diplomatic burdens associated with the Yugoslav crisis, I don't think it ever stood a chance of finding any fruitful resolution to the problems.

We contributed a high ranking American diplomat as the U.S. representative on the Contact Group, and put in him charge of running our day to day Yugoslav policy, in conjunction with the other members of the Contact Group. This assignment was given first to Reggie Bartholomew who had served as an Undersecretary of State before taking on that role. However, no progress was made on any of the Yugoslav issues during his tenure. When he moved on as our Ambassador to Italy, Charles Redman took over that job. Frankly, he had an impossible mission.

I'm nor sure I ever fully understood the idea of the Contact Group, or the role we were going to play on it. Redman took on a lower key role than Bartholomew. I guess we thought we could take something of a back seat in the crisis, and leave the drivers seat to others on the Contact Group. But, in reality we could never just be one of many members on that team. Given our size and posture, we were going to end up carrying much of the baggage no matter what. So it was inevitable that we would again end up out in front trying to push or guide the rest of the contact group members. This was certainly no easy task. The Group could not agree on any real steps to take. And the group's weakness and lack of cohesion was easily played by the Serbs to their advantage.

The Contact Group got into one kind of negotiating charade after another, and ended up supporting a plan that we ourselves didn't believe could work. That was the Vance-Owen plan.



The idea behind the Vance Owen plan was that Bosnia would be divided into numerous districts or cantons. Each canton would run its own local affairs. The ethnic affiliation of each canton would be determined by the majority within the canton. Some would be Bosniac. Some would be Serb, and some would be Croat. Together, they would form an inter-dependent patchwork of cantons each led by a different political affiliation depending on the ethnicity of the canton. It was hoped that the economic and infrastructure interdependence of the Cantons would eventually foster greater political and social cooperation between the cantons and between the different ethnic groups.

Our attitude was - and Christopher's attitude was, and he said so, so I can say so - that this was unworkable and inequitable. The plan, he said, gave the Serbs a reward for their aggression and was not justified. We abandoned the Vance - Owen approach at Dayton, but that's a very different story to be told later.

At the time we voiced support for the Vance Owen plan, or at least some modified version of the plan. After all we wanted to be seen as team player on the Contact Group. Richard Owen complains in his book that we undercut Vance and him. But, I don't think that plan would have worked in any case.

Nevertheless, the Vance Owen plan was the only plan on the table and became the principal negotiating position of the Contact Group. As we moved forward on this plan, the Serbs used differences between the members of the Contact Group to push us into various stances and issues that we certainly uncomfortable. I don't the Contact Group achieved any positive results during this whole time period.

Meanwhile, the one part of our policy toward Serbia that did take hold and gain traction was the sanctions. The Sanctions got progressively tighter throughout 1993. The Sanctions Assistance Missions closed a tight circle of control around Serbia. Trade with Serbia diminished to a trickle. The MIF/NATO ships effectively reduced the flow of oil to Serbia through the Adriatic. We also enlisted the support of the Western European Union (WEU) which stationed gunboats on the Danube below and above Serbia to ensure the verification of cargoes moving on the river to, and through Serbia. Yugoslavia's own fleet was locked up in ports around the world. Oil imports into Serbia also slowed considerably. I have to note with regard to the WEU and the Danube, if I have one claim to fame vis a vis Europe it is that I can say with some honesty that our task force gave the WEU its first ever military role when they manned 2 gunboats, one in Hungary and one in Romania, to patrol the Danube River.



The Danube operation was really something special. We put together a very sophisticated system using the latest techniques in electronics and advanced state of the art equipment. We used the WEU to patrol the river and customs agents to control the cargoes. We used GPS and other electronic surveillance to trace the movement of river barges and their cargoes up and down the river. We knew when barges stopped and offloaded, or when they changed their weight in the water.

By the beginning of winter in November/December 1993 economic conditions in Serbia were deteriorating rapidly. The sanctions were having a considerable impact. The winter had started early in the Balkans that year and was quite harsh. Oil was in extremely short supply. There were hardly any energy reserves left. Serbian Industry was grinding to a halt. The Serbian Dinar was entering the zone of super hyperinflation and was reaching 50 billion Dinar to the dollar. It had become a worthless currency. Milosevic was reportedly starting to panic. He requested special authorization from the United Nations to travel to Western Europe for the purposes of negotiating a settlement. The Europeans were hot to trot. "Let's get him here and make a deal," they said. I remember walking into Leon Fuerths office and telling him "We're never going to have the sanctions ANY tighter than we have them now."

The Vance-Owen plan was still the only plan on the table. However, European leaders were pleased that Milosevic was willing to talk to them about a possible settlement. He asked them what he needed to do to get the sanctions lifted. The Europeans wanted to develop a common response on the steps necessary for sanctions lifting. They asked that the U.S. send an approved emissary to discuss such a common position. Fuerth asked me if I was interested in going. I told him yes. But Christopher opposed the idea. He thought that negotiations with Milosevic would be premature, and that the West should not signal any better deal than the one on the table, even if he didn't think the Vance Owen plan would work.

I may be way off, but by this time there probably were a lot of other things in play such as things you've discussed with some of the other people you've mentioned. But the answer was, no, I wasn't to go. It was just one of those moments in history. Maybe there was an opportunity to deal and get something done because Milosevic and Serbia were hurting. In any event this opportunity was soon lost. In the days ahead, the pressure on Milosevic began to weaken. And it would take another two years or more before we would have Milosevic in the same position.



Let me explain. The winter that had begun so severely in November 1993, eased off considerably by the New Year. This was very good news for the suffering people in Sarajevo who had suffered so much during the months before. The softening of the winter chill probably saved a number of lives there. But, at the same time, it also eased the pressure on Serbia and the Serbian people. Demand for heating fuel began to diminish. At the same time, Greece, reacting to emotional impulses concerning Ancient Greek history decided to impose an embargo on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In their view, the upstart Macedonia was trying to steal their history, and historic symbols. This put Macedonia in a vice. They were not supposed to trade with Serbia, and now they could not trade with Greece. The movement of goods was being stopped at both borders. Well, the Macedonians decided that if their border to the south with Greece was closed they would open their border with Serbia. Some believe that Greece knew that would be the reaction and had taken the steps it did to relieve the sanctions pressures on Serbia.

There was also a third development which lessened the impact of the sanctions. In January 1994 Milosevic appointed Dragoslav Avramovic as President of Serbia's National Bank. Avramovic moved immediately to devalue the Dinar and to link it directly to the German Mark. He literally threw away the old Serbian dinar and began afresh with a new stable currency. He was able to provide new credibility to Serbia's currency which lasted for several months. With a stable currency, goods flowing in again through Macedonia, and a mild winter, Slobodan Milosevic was off the hook. Spring came early that year and the dour mood in Serbia began to change. It took well into 1995 before Milosevic was again under similar pressure from the sanctions, and from the deteriorating situation in Bosnia. By that time the Croat-Muslim Federation, which we now know had been covertly rearmed, began to gain an upper hand against the Bosnian Serbs.

1994 was a terrible year for everyone involved in the Yugoslav war. The diplomatic efforts of the Contact Group were going haywire. And the number of atrocities in Bosnia seemed to only increase. The Bosnian Serbs seemed well entrenched and their siege of Sarajevo was wrecking havoc. Milosevic seemed able to play the Contact Group very effectively. At one point he even seemed to join with the Contact Group to place his own sanctions on the Bosnian Serbs. He appeared to champion a new formulation of the Vance Owen Plan, despite the Bosnian Serb Parliament rejection of the latest effort which was being brokered by the Greeks. There is now strong reason to believe that all that was just posturing by Milosevic to get the sanctions loosened. By the beginning of 1995 the situation began to look disastrous. However, there were new forces at play that would subsequently change dramatically the situation in Bosnia.

The first was the training and rearming of the new Croatian Army and their temporary Bosniac allies. This allowed a combined Croatian Bosniac force to withstand a major 1995 spring offensive launched by the Bosnian Serbs in the Bihac pocket. This was followed by a counter offensive by Croatian forces to clean out Serbian forces (and much of the Serbian population in the Krjina).



The second major change was the elections in France and the departure of Francois Mitterand. Mitterand had opposed strengthening the military capabilities of the Observer forces in Bosnia. He had also opposed rearming the Croats and Bosniacs. Jacques Chirac was ready to take a much more activist position. He was tired of seeing French forces in Bosnia in helpless situations. This was particularly case when these soldiers were being held as hostages or tied to light posts to prevent air strikes..

The third were the increasing atrocities that were blamed mostly on the Bosnian Serbs. This had become a major embarrassment to the West and its inability to deal with these actions. The Srebrenica massacre underscored the impotence of the UN forces in Yugoslavia and demanded further steps be taken to strengthen those forces.

These changes led to the eventual creation of the Rapid Reaction Force which, in turn, alleviated concerns over the vulnerability of the UN Observer forces in Bosnia and opened the way to increased air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs. The creation of the Rapid Reaction Force also marked a change in President Clinton's thinking about the war. For the first time the United States was willing to contemplate the introduction of U.S. forces in the conflict if it became necessary to extract the UN Observer forces and the rapid reaction force from the Bosnian theater.

Other forces were at play with regard to the situation in Serbia itself. The economic situation in Serbia in the fall of 1995 was again disastrous. Unable to retool or repair, Serbia's industry was in rapid decline. Obsolescence had also set in. The sanctions, although never as tight as they were in 1993 were being reenforced by Serbia's lack of competitiveness in the international market place. Serbia had lost most of its markets for its products, even its critical agricultural products. Nobody wanted Serbian goods. Another reason that Serbia had lost its markets was that the newly emerging democracies in Eastern Europe experienced their own rapid economic growth between 1993 and 1995. They successfully went after the markets previously served by Serbia.

Oil was also again in very short supply. Serbia didn't have any money left to buy oil, especially at the premium prices engendered by sanctions. Serbia was going broke. Inflation was again rampant.

Serbia also began to face new refugee crisis that further exacerbated the economic disaster Serbia was facing. The Serbs streaming out of Krijina and from the expanding combat zones in Bosnia were pushing into Serbia. There were also new rumblings and problems in Kosovo set in motion, in part by Serbia's efforts to send the new Serbian refugees to settle in Kosovo. They were up a proverbial creek without a paddle.



To make the situation even worse, Winter was setting in and Serbia had virtually no stores of heating oil to cope. The Russians had also cut off the gas to Serbia (in large part because of non payment).

All these pressures combined to lead to Milosevic to the conclusion that he really had to find a way out of this crisis. These factors, I believe, weighed heavily on his decision to go to Dayton. I should point out that no bombs had fallen in Serbia. None of the fighting had spread to Serbia. There were no air strikes against Serbia. All that was occurring in Bosnia. Serbia was under no military threat. The only real pressure against Milosevic and Serbia were the sanctions. And Milosevic needed to deal. He needed to get them lifted. Sanctions, as much, if not more than any other factor, brought Milosevic to Dayton.

Richard Holbrooke, in his book "To End a War," states that the one precondition that Milosevic put to his coming to Dayton was a relaxation of the energy flow. But, I don't think he tells the right story about that in his book. He focuses on the energy issue as a Sarajevo problem. That we needed to get gas flowing on to Sarajevo for the winter. I don't think Milosevic gave a damn about gas flowing into Sarajevo. The issue was to get gas and oil flowing again to Serbia. Milosevic said as a precondition of coming to Dayton, oil had to flow across the border. That was the concession from the West that he pushed for. And, to this day, I cannot understand why we gave him that concession. We should have held back on energy flow to Serbia until we got the positive outcome we wanted at Dayton. Allowing the oil to flow into Serbia before Dayton got started meant that we gave away one the principal levers we held over him. We significantly weakened our negotiating hand and significantly strengthened his. Milosevic immediately set out to bring in as much oil as possible, and to build back up Serbia's oil reserve. He squeezed every penny Serbia had to bring in that oil.

Q: This probably is a good place to stop.

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Today is December 10, 2002. The bite was happening to Serbia as the embargo hit it. What then happened? Were you getting any pressures? Was the Serb community getting after you?

COMRAS: By that time, I had left the frontlines of the sanctions program to others. In the Spring of 1994 I was assigned as the First Chief of Mission to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. I was asked to open up a U.S. Liaison Office in Skopje pending our decision on establishing formal diplomatic relations with Macedonia. But, while in Skopje I continued to keep a hand on sanctions. I worked to stem the flow of goods across Macedonia to and from Serbia, and I certainly gave my point of view to Washington on sanctions questions as they arose. I must say that did not make me very popular with lots of folks back home. They did not want my views on sanctions. At least Holbrooke didn't want them. But, I made myself heard anyway.



Slobodan Milosevic tried hard throughout the sanctions period to convince public opinion that the sanctions were misplaced and that they only hurt innocent people. Milosevic sought to hit at the humanitarian aspects of sanctions and how they were harmful and hurting the poor, the infirmed, and the old. The same issues were played up by those opposed to the sanctions on Iraq.

One of the problems with sanctions is that those in power are able, at least initially, to insulate themselves from their effects. And, in some cases, they're able to benefit and profit from the sanctions. That is why good sanctions management and targeted sanctions, are so important.

In the Yugoslav context, the regime was profiting from the sanctions. It bolstered what was already becoming early on a mafia like regime in Serbia. This fed into that mafia style where smuggling, graft, extortion and favoritism were normal fair. Sanctions distort market practices and create vulnerabilities that foster criminal activities. They increase the importance of the black market and black market activities. The regime in power seeks to deflect a good part of the effect of the sanctions on to the poorer elements of their society. They not only do so to insulate and protect themselves but also to use that as a counterweight against the sanctions to try and create an international pressure against the sanctions. We were all aware of that.

The sanctions in some ways are like a siege. But modern sanctions are quite different in many respects. Exceptions from the sanctions are granted for humanitarian purposes. For example, oil was available to Serbia where the oil distribution could be monitoring to ensure that it was being used for civilian requirements rather than for military or industrial uses.

There has been a lot of thought and study on the sanctions issues since the Yugoslav experience. This has led to the evolution of what some people call smart or targeted sanctions. Such smart or targeted sanctions were used subsequently in Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war. Yes, there was a lot of pressure on the issue of the humanitarian effects and the harmful effects of the sanctions on the Serb population during much of this period. Some of that was offset by the fact that it was sometimes difficult to direct their sympathy towards the Serbian people when they were seeing the atrocities that were taking place, the much worse situation for the people who were living in Sarajevo and elsewhere in Bosnia. This is a very complex question.

Q: While you were dealing with this, were some people saying, "This isn't working. Let's bomb the hell out of them?" Was that the card that somebody was trying to play?



COMRAS: There were several things that led to Dayton. No one was saying, "Let's bomb the Serbs," but they were saying, "Let's bomb the Bosnian Serbs." In late 1995 we were back to a policy close to the original "Lift, Strike, Sanctions" policy. As I explained earlier there were many reasons for the resuscitations of these policies. One was the change in regime in France. I consider that to be one of the key elements that led to the road to peace in Bosnia. When Jacques Chirac was elected president of France and the Mitterrand era had come to an end and Chirac was ready to take a more rigorous posture.

Q: Mitterrand was dying at this point. Was it just that socialists didn't like to be tough or did they have an affinity towards the Serbs? What was our analysis of why the French were being so difficult?

COMRAS: There were historical relations between France and Serbia. The French had a stake in bringing peace to the Balkans, but they did not want U.S. interference or leadership. They also wanted to appear even handed as between the Serbs, the Croats and the Bosniacs. They were not prepared, under Mitterrand, to place the blame on Serbia or Milosevic. The tenets of French policy were that the French were in place in Bosnia. As peacekeepers, the peacekeepers were playing a valuable and effective role, and a peacekeeper is not a party to a conflict. This meant that France would oppose the introduction of additional force and arms that risked turning the peacekeepers into combatants. They also believed that peace could only be achieved by putting equal pressure on both the Bosniacs and the Serbs.

Chirac questioned these policy tenets. He was no longer willing - and he campaigned on that - to take the insult to the French military that had resulted from a number of incidents with the Bosnian Serbs. His view was that the French weren't going to stay there and be only a liability as ineffective peacekeepers. If French troops were going to stay, they would have to be able to defend themselves and have sufficient force to influence the situation on the ground. This is what gave rise to the idea of the Rapid Reaction Force. One necessary condition was that the Rapid Reaction Force would have to be able to get in and get out, and get the peacekeepers out, even if hostilities turned against them. This required a commitment of help from the U.S. The United States had to agree that it would provide the necessary support, including manpower and soldiers, if it came to extracting the Rapid Reaction Force.

Once the Rapid Reaction Force was on the ground, the peacekeepers were no longer as vulnerable. The opposition to air strike was lessened. And, as events unfolded with further Bosnian Serb atrocities, air strikes became a reality. The Rapid Reaction Force presence, air strikes, and, the covert rearming meant that we had, at long last in place the original lift strike sanctions policy proposed by Clinton in February 1993. These are the elements that Holbrooke had in place to bolster his negotiations with Milosevic that led to the Dayton meeting.



As I said earlier the Serbs were under great pressure in late 1995. There was no oil. Winter was coming. The economy was in total shambles. The currency was again falling back into hyperinflation. Because of the advances that had taken place in cleaning out Serb pockets in the Krjina by the Croats and because of the advances that were taking place in Bosnia, there were an enormous amount of refugees that were flowing into Serbia proper. Some of those refugees had been sent down initially to Kosovo. Kosovo was already having some of its own problems. There was further Serb movement out of Kosovo back into Serbia. Unemployment was rampant. In addition, Serbia had lost its markets overseas. Even where it had been able to circumvent in the past and bring goods out one way or the other, nobody wanted them anymore because other economies had grown in the time when Serbia's economy had not grown. So, all these things came together very dramatically in the fall of '95 and there were a couple of moments there when history could have taken various courses.

One course that history could have taken was to allow the Bosniac/Croatian fall offensive in Bosnia to play out with allied air strike support. The Bosniac/Croat forces had moved to within 12 kilometers of Banja Luka, one of the largest towns in Serbian occupied Bosnia. According to several accounts Holbrooke and other members of the old Contact Group put enormous pressure on them to stop their advance as we dealt with Milosevic in Belgrade. This could have been a defining moment in the conflict which might have led to a major defeat of Bosnian Serbs aspirations for a divided Bosnia. However, some contend that Serbia would never have allowed Banja Luka to fall. They maintain that if the offensive had not halted Serbian Army forces would have intervened directly in the conflict, widening and extending the war. I doubt that that would have happened, but, it certainly was a possibility. I don't think it would have changed anything at that point, especially if we were going to continue with our Lift Strike Sanctions policy, and expand air strikes against Serbia as required. I think that the NATO bombing and the NATO warnings to Serbia at that time not to engage directly in the Bosnian conflict would have dissuaded them. Even if they had come in on the side of the Bosniacs, it would have been an even greater disaster for Serbia.

Milosevic was savvy enough to know that he was in deep kimchee, as were the Bosnian Serbs. He was looking for a way out. The one other factor was that the political risks to Milosevic on dealing on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs was diminished by the fact that the Bosnian Serbs were in such a disadvantaged position. When the Bosnian Serbs were strong, Milosevic, who I always believed was able still to control them and still use them in his own interests, still had a very limited area in which he could manipulate them. They were strong. He couldn't completely undercut them even if that was his intention. However, at this point Milosevic truly had a free hand in dealing on the Bosnian Serb's behalf. There were no political forces among the Serbs strong enough to take him on. He was able at Dayton to make all the decisions regarding the Bosnian Serbs. His hand was also reinforced vis a vis the Bosnian Serbs as we refused to allow the Bosnian Serb leadership to attend the Dayton conference.



I was very uncomfortable with Dayton at the time for a number of reasons. I may have made a major career mistake in making my unhappiness known at the time. I was concerned that at Dayton we would do what we had sworn not to do back in the early days of 1992 and 1993. At that time we were committed to holding Milosevic responsible for the terrible wars in Croatia and Bosnia, and for the atrocities that resulted. We pledged not to allow him to ride out of this conflict as a peacemaker on a white horse because we knew, and I think history has finally confirmed in the Hague, that the responsibilities for so much of what was going on in Bosnia was his.

But, at Dayton, Milosevic reemerged as one of the peacemakers. I found this very disturbing. I still believe that Milosevic got off lightly in Milosevic. He won at the Negotiating table what the Bosnian Serbs could not win in the battlefield. He made their aggression pay off. In fact, he got more than he would have gotten under the Vance Owen Plan which we thought, in January 1994 was already too sweet a deal. Both the Clinton and first Bush Administration opposed allowing Milosevic or the Bosnian Serbs to benefit from aggression.

One of the first issues going into Dayton was the use and disposition of the sanctions in place. There was real battle going on within the Administration on the issue of whether or not to relax the sanctions on energy and oil pending the outcome of Dayton. We had given in to Milosevic (against my best advice) on his oil shipment demands going into Dayton. Holbrooke argued that as a precondition the only way he could get Milosevic to Dayton - and I don't think that was true - was by suspending the sanctions at least as they relate to the energy and to the flow of oil. Once you let the sanctions down, once the oil or other products could come in, once you put n standby the whole sanctions process that you created, it's not something you can turn on turn back on easily. It would take enormous political clout, time, resources and energy to put the sanctions back in place, and even then, it might just prove impossible to reestablish the same level of control. You can only lift the sanctions once. If you do it at the outset they become a much weaker lever in the negotiations still at hand. Having given literally given them away at the outset, we lost one of the critical levers we had at Dayton.

Let me jump ahead and say that Dayton served one major positive interest and that was to bring an end to the fighting - to the killing and suffering. I wasn't sure it would have that result. But, subsequent events, and in particular, the role of SFOR, led to a stabilization in Bosnia that brought further hopes for true peace. SFOR succeeded in getting the Bosnian Serb Army back into their bases. It negated their military power which, eventually became marginalized. It provided the administrators with the overwhelming force they needed to keep the peace and to allow civilian institutions to function. In that sense, Dayton can be viewed as a success. But, the situation in Bosnia still remains precarious today.



But the road to Dayton and Dayton itself gave rise to a number of legitimate concerns. I argued against relaxing the sanctions on energy. I drafted an op-ed on the need to stay strong on the sanctions until we could get the concessions that were required for peace. Of course, that was not what my bosses in the State Department wanted to hear. They disapproved my clearance request for the Op-ed. It wasn't published, but they still slapped my wrist.

I was concerned that, at Dayton, we were concentrating too much on paper agreements. This included various paper formulas for political institutions. In the end, none of them served any real purpose. The political institutions and processes developed according to their own dynamics. The only meaningful part of the accord was the end to the fighting and the introduction of SFOR.

From my perspective, Dayton was not really as much a diplomatic success as it should have been. I hope the full story of Dayton comes out soon, and that historians begin to truly analyze the results. There are a lot of things that have still to be known and understood about Dayton that are not out there yet in the public domain. I hope one day they will get out there. I'm not sure about the accuracy about all that I have heard or my own interpretations of some of that. But I think they're fairly right. The fact of the matter is, when you look at what came out of Dayton initially, the concessions that were finally made by the Serb side under the circumstances were minor. There were only a couple of substantial concessions. First of all there was the issue of the division of territory. 51%.to go to the Bosniacs. That was made into a much bigger issue than it was because who really cared about mountaintops?Q: I spent quite a bit of time there over the years. My god there is an awful lot of territory that nobody unless you like climbing up and down steep mountains... It's a valley. You have to live in the valley in order to survive.

COMRAS: Exactly. So it was easy to draw a map so that you could give 51% of it. So that really wasn't a big concession. There was also the question of the creation of the entities. That was a great victory for the Serbs. They got recognition for Serbska republic. The Serbs had to make only two moderately painful concessions. One was for a unified Sarajevo, That was the hardest one. We know that the reaction to that was that they simply burned down their part of Sarajevo before they left. That was a real disaster. The other concession was that they had to take a gamble on the outcome of the Brčko Corridor. The decision at Dayton oBrčko was just to "leave it on the table. We'll work that out later."

Q: This was the connection between the 2 parts of the Serb area.



COMRAS: Right. The corridor issue were important to all three groups in Bosnia - The Croats, the Serbs and the Bosniacs. The fact of the matter is that at the end of the negotiating process, the person most unhappy with the results and the one that didn't want to sign was not Slobodan Milosevic. Rather it was the Bosnian President Alkja Izetbegovic. You may recall that in the final overtime days at Dayton Secretary Warren Christopher had to fly to Dayton to keep the negotiations from coming apart. He had to assuage Izetbegovic. This he did by assuring him that the United States and the other allies would train and rearm the Bosnian Army. This was a promise we only partially kept as none of our allies, except for the Turks were willing to participate in assisting the new Bosnian Army. Looking at the final document, Izetbegovic is reported to have said. "What have I done?" BBC quoted him as explaining his agreement to the document in the following terms. He said "This may not be a just peace, but it is more just than the continuation of War."

Q: He was the head of the Bosniacs.

COMRAS: Yes, and he realized that at Dayton he had just agreed to partition his country. He had agreed to the creation of a Serb Republic in Bosnia. And had given the Serbs exactly what they had asked for. The Bosnian Serbs had fought for partition and now Dayton was giving it to them. Izetbegovic had to be put under enormous pressure to agree to this outcome. We told him that if he signed we would "Train and Equip" his army. If he did not we would leave the Bosniacs out in the cold. The Europeans never agreed to this. They never would. Nevertheless we told Izetbegovic "This is the best deal you're going to get and you'd better go along. If not, who knows what's going to happen? We were saying also, "If you agree, we will assure that you have military parity, that your forces are significantly trained and equipped." That was a major promise.

Q: When I was an election observer, there was a British military man condemning this.

COMRAS: So what were the real results in Dayton. A partitioned Bosnia, broken into 3 entities that hated each other. A Country that could be held together only by SFOR A country with an uncertain future. Milosevic still in power in Serbia. Karazic and Mladic still outside the hands of justice. And the seeds to a new conflict in Kosovo. But, you did get peace.

One can question whether that was a diplomatic success given the situation that had led to it and the tools that might have been available at the outset to get a better deal.

One of the issues that we didn't address at Dayton was the Kosovo issue. That began to take on its own life afterwards.



With the fall of Milosevic there is now a real possibility for eventual peace and progress in Bosnia and in all of the former Yugoslavia. Q: Also the normal economic development that happens... People get set... "I'm not going to take up a rifle and go fight my neighbors." You could see that people were making more and more investment in the area. Pretty soon these nationalistic things don't stir so much.

COMRAS: Exactly. So there are reasons to be more optimistic about Bosnia today. So if you have to evaluate the pluses and the minuses of Dayton, the one great plus is it brought peace. That is undeniable and worth many things in and of itself. Therefore, it can never be called a complete failure. But could it have come out better and could peace have been established easier and could the foundations for peace and economic growth have been better laid at Dayton? I think there was a good chance that they may have been the case had we played our cards better than we did.

Q: Let's go to you now. What happened? When did you move off and how did the Macedonian thing work out?



COMRAS: At the end of 1993 sanctions were working and I had gained some recognition for a job well done. There was even talk of putting my name forth to serve as Chief of Mission. Malta was mentioned, as was Trinidad and Tobago. But neither materialized. We were late in the assignment process and I thought that I would be staying where I was with the task force for a while longer. As I had reached the age of 50, I was even considering eventual retirement with over 25 years of service. I was looking forward to the Christmas holidays and a bit of relaxation when I got a call from the Deputy Director of Personnel, who said, "I want to ask you something. The D Committee would like to ask you if you'd be interested in going off to be our ambassador to Macedonia. We're not sure what's going to happen or the timetable on this, but the European Union has just recognized Macedonia and we expect that we will follow suit shortly. We want to be able to announce everything together. It may first be a Liaison office or it may be an Embassy right off the bat. But let us know. Don't talk to anybody about it except your family. Give me a call back in the next day or so." So, after talking with my family and discussing it with others, I said, "It's a great opportunity" and called back and said I would be interested. They said, "Thank you very much" and nothing happened. At least not until early February 1994. At that time a letter was sent to then President Kiro Gligorov of Macedonia saying that if he agreed to an exchange of letters incorporating the suggested text provided him, we will move ahead with the establishment of diplomatic relations and establish an embassy in Skopje. Gligorov responded within 24 hours, using the text the U.S. provided. But, then again nothing happened. I began to look at the exchange of letters. There was some difference of opinion as to whether the exchange of letters constituted recognition, or further steps were necessary. There was also some difference of view regarding the steps necessary to establish an Embassy in Skopje. This included how to handle the congressional notification requirements. I never quite understood what was going on. I would have thought that we would already know what the routine was to establish new diplomatic relations and to begin opening an embassy. We had already done this with so many new countries. Nevertheless, there was a barrage of memorandums and some of them conflicted with each other. Within just a few days word leaked about the fact that the United States was about to grant diplomatic recognition to Macedonia. This produced a major outcry from the Greek-American community and from Greece. On February 16, there was an enormous demonstration in Athens and in Thessaloniki protesting the intended U.S. action to recognize Macedonia. The Greeks used this as an excuse to impose an embargo on Macedonia, which, as I explained earlier, led Macedonia to relax controls on its own border with Serbia. Enormous pressure was put on the White House to back away from diplomatic relations with Macedonia. The White House began having second thoughts and decided that rather than move ahead with full diplomatic relations they would seek to find some other road forward. They decided to establish de facto rather than de jure recognition and to establish a liaison office rather than an Embassy. They asked me to serve as Chief of Mission of the Liaison Office and they appointed Matthew Nimitz as a special Presidential envoy to help work out a solution to the dispute between Greece and Macedonia over Macedonia's name, flag, use of symbols and possible irredentist issues. This was an ongoing dispute between Greece and Macedonia, one that was already in the hands of Cyrus Vance, as special UN representative charged with finding a negotiated settlement between the Greeks and the Macedonians.



The role Nimitz was to play was similar to the role of our special envoy for Cyprus where you also had a UN representative seeking to work out the Cyprus issue between the Turks and the Greeks. On Macedonia it was Cyrus Vance for the UN and Matthew Nimitz for the United States. Nimitz had been an under secretary of state in the Nixon Administration. He was a prominent attorney and negotiator. A brilliant man. Early on, we were introduced to each other. Nimitz told me that we had a very difficult task ahead. Nevertheless he hoped to find a resolution to the problems and thought he could probably finish his mission within three months. He was very optimistic. So was I. However, it took almost two years just to get a partial settlement.

Nimitz and I worked together on three principal issues - the name, the flag, and the symbols. With regard to irredentism it was easy to try to get the Macedonians to say that they have no territorial ambitions on Greece since they recognized early on that even if they had such intentions (which they did not) Greece as a NATO member could easily resist them. So the real issues were the name, the flag and the symbols that Greece believed belonged to Greece's heritage alone.

Q: What was the symbol on the flag?

COMRAS: The first Macedonian flag had a red background with a golden symbol in the center which, according to Greece represented what is known as the Star of Vergina. This, they maintained was the symbol of Philip of Macedon, and was a symbol of ancient Greece. It belonged to them. The Star of Vergina was identified with the House of Macedonia and Alexander the Great and Phillip of Macedonia. The fact that Macedonia had put that on the flag was like sticking fingers into the eyes of the Greeks. The Greeks did not want that flag to have what they called a "Greek symbol" because that was, they thought, an aggression against their own heritage. The name was the same kind of issue. The Greeks lay claim to the name Macedonia. They have a province in Northern Greece called Macedonia. They claim it as part of their heritage. Their concern is also attached to a history that has involved several Balkan Wars and conflicting claims to this territory in the 20th Century. These issues can only be understood within the context of Balkan history - some of it recent, some of it old. Remember that this whole area was still in the hands of the Turks during the beginning of the 20th Century. It's not until World War I that you get the northern Greece that you have today. Even in the late 1920s you had an enormous population exchange between the Turks and the Greeks and there had been problems and pressures between them. A lot of the Greeks that were in northern Greece were already very insecure. They had already gone through great trauma. In the 1950s there was the Greek civil war which was also an ethnic war between the Slavic speakers and the Greek speakers in Northern Greece - the area known as Macedonia.

Q: And Yugoslavia had backed for a while the communist-



COMRAS: So it was against this sense of great vulnerability that this crisis took root. It only makes any sense in the context of those vulnerabilities. Even with those vulnerabilities, it probably makes no sense. That's why it finally has dissipated. But it was an emotional issue in the 1990s.

Q: I served 5 years in Belgrade and 4 years in Athens. It was palpable. It was one of these very good political ploys in Greece. Greek politics are really personal politics. If you took a strong line on that, it was like waving the flag and supporting motherhood and all that. It was a good political instrument.

COMRAS: That's right. I don't think the White House expected the reaction they receive. After all, the European Union was already ahead of us in its relationship with Macedonia, and Greece is a member of the European Union. But, politics and is politics. And the Greek reaction was so strong that the White House wanted this issue put on hold. But, there were also other interests to be considered. There was a conflict already raging in the Balkans and a real risk that it could spread southward and engulf Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania, and perhaps even Greece.

Macedonia was extremely vulnerable even though it had left the Yugoslav federation peacefully. It had no military capability of its own. It could easily be occupied by Serbia. The fear was that given the other historical problems in which Macedonia found itself, if the war did spread south, it might have enormous implications for Greece, for Turkey, for the NATO alliance, and for various other interests in the region.

There was a general recognition in the EU and in Washington that Macedonia had to be reinforced in such a way as to signal to Serbia very clearly that they were not welcome to take it back.



A decision was taken to place a UN preventive peacekeeping force along Macedonia's border with Serbia. These peacekeepers would be able to monitor the border and serve as a trip wire for an international response if Serbia troops crossed the line. Initially the peacekeepers all came from Scandinavian countries. However, to provide additional credibility, President Bush, before leaving office, issued what was known as the Christmas Warning to Milosevic. He drew another line in the sand. If Serbia crossed the line and undertook military action in Kosovo or in Macedonia, that would engender a real risks of a U.S. response. In order to back that up, there was a plan to send a contingent of American soldiers to join the other UN peacekeepers on the border. When President Clinton came in, he approved the plan. He stationed a 500 person detachment of American soldiers bringing the total number of peacekeepers on the border to about 1000. We also wanted to show support for the moderate Gligorov regime in Macedonia in order to make it clear to all of Macedonia's neighbors that we had a direct interest in keeping Macedonia peaceful and stable. That was the principal reason for our going ahead with at least a Liaison Office in Skopje.

I went out to Macedonia in late March 1994. I joined an officer who had been posted there temporarily from our Belgrade embassy, as well as an American AID Director and a USIS Library Office Director. They were already on detail to Skopje when I arrived there. I also was accompanied by an Administrative Officer, Adolpho Ramirez, to help me get things up and started. It is always a great challenge to establish a new diplomatic post anywhere. But, this was especially the case in Skopje given the closed borders with both Serbia and Greece and the lack of almost every item and commodity in the local market place.

We started with a small rented office area. We say we came with a box, a chair, and a typewriter, and joined in with the others. We moved fairly quickly to hire a small staff. We were able to draw on a pool of good local employees that were working with some of the international agencies already established in Skopje. Eventually we found an adequate building - an empty Kindergarten, which we had to convince Washington to lease and turn into our future embassy. We convinced the Macedonian government to lease us the building long-term - 25 years plus. We eventually were able to get Washington to put some money into the building to turn it into a real diplomatic premise.

The negotiations between Greece and Macedonia on the name and symbols was moving ahead very very slowly. Both Cyrus Vance and Matthew Nimitz were working very hard along with another retired American diplomat who assisted Cyrus Vance. That was Ambassador Herbert Okun. Our Ambassador in Athens, Thomas Niles was also very active trying to bring the Greeks around. I worked hard on this in Skopje, meeting regularly with President Gligorov and other senior Macedonia officials - and seeking to reassure them that we would support, and help them retain, their independence. But, these were very emotional issues on both sides, and both Papandreu and Gligorov were proving to be particularly stubborn on even the most minor details of any agreement. Neither trusted the other to keep their word.



In August of 1995, Herb Okun and Matt Nimitz and I met with President Gligorov at his summer home in Ohrid to try and seal a deal. Okun and Nimitz were on a shuttle mission between Greece and Macedonia. We were working on the framework for an agreement and were concentrating on an interim solution that would lead also to full U.S. diplomatic relations with Macedonia. We were finally able to get agreement in principle, although all sides recognized that some of the details still needed to be refined. It was agreed that this could be done in early September when both the Greek and Macedonian Foreign Ministers were in New York. An Agreement could then be announced publicly at a ceremony at the United Nations. This would be done under the auspices of CyruVance.

Feeling a great sense of accomplishment we each left Ohrid in different directions. I flew back to the United States to move my son into College and planned to return to Skopje just after Labor Day.

Q: This raises a question. We all know that in dealing with Israel, one had to be very careful about reporting because the Israeli/Jewish influence is such that almost everything that came appeared on a senator's desk. The Greek lobby was renowned for being almost as powerful. Was this what you were concerned about?

COMRAS: In part. I was surprised to learn how active both Greek American groups and Slavic American Groups were with regard to the Macedonia issue. As I noted before, these were very emotional issues for both Greeks and Slavs.

But, there was also another set of more parochial concerns at play. Neither Okun or Nimitz wanted me to provide Washington right away with the details we had worked out on the agreement. I think they were concerned about the way the information would be handled back in Washington. I insisted that Washington be informed at least on the outlines. I wanted Washington to know that an agreement had pretty much been put in place, along with an understanding on a road map to complete the agreement. It was already agreed that the Greek and Macedonian Foreign Ministers would meet under Vance's auspices in September at the General Assembly to work out any final details, and agreement was going to be reached and all the other things were going to happen.



I flew off to go to the States to move my son to university and was surprised the day before Labor Day to hear a very important announcement from both Athens and Skopje that an agreement had been reached between Macedonia and the Greeks. The issue had been solved. In fact, Ambassador Holbrooke had just flown in and had flown to Greece and to Skopje and he was pleased to announce that he had achieved the agreement of both parties. I was in the United States. Tom Niles was up in the mountains of northern Greece somewhere. I called Matthew Nimitz and Herb Okun and they were flabbergasted. Cyrus Vance even went ballistic. But, what was done was done. Holbrooke had decided to beat the others to the table to claim credit for this major accomplishment. However, the problem was that nobody had yet worked out the final details. The Greeks were under the impression that the Macedonians had simply come off of their bracketed language. The Macedonians were under the impression that the Greeks had come off of their bracketed language. Both thought the other wanted to move forward with the earlier announcement.

Q: What do you mean by "bracketed language," you might explain that.

COMRAS: The preliminary test of the agreement worked out in Ohrid contained a number of bracketed phrases that represented different word formulations preferred by one side of the other. The different formulations sometimes meant nothing, but sometimes carried nuances that were important to one side or the other. These were the final details to be worked out with Cyrus Vance. This was word-smithing, but word-smithing can become important in these kinds of agreements. None of the issues were worth dying over, but they were issues that needed further work and possible tradeoffs. So, both sides came to the table in New York believing that their formulations had been accepted by the other party eager to claim a deal. Each had expected the final document to incorporate their language. When the parties got to New York, they both felt embarrassed and concerned that these expectations were not being met. Both became doubly suspicious of the others motives. And it looked like the agreement might even fall apart. That was the risk of a premature announcement. It was announced before it was supposed to have been announced by parties who weren't supposed to announce it.

It took a little while, quite a while, of intense diplomatic negotiations in New York, in Athens, and in Skopje late into the night to finally put the agreement back into place. It came with a little kicker which was interesting from my perspective. The Foreign Minister of Macedonia made it very clear that he was not going to go to the signing ceremony, he was not even going to leave his hotel room, until he had been called by President Gligorov and informed that full U.S. diplomatic relations had been announced publicly in Skopje. (end of tape)



I was instructed by the State Department to station myself out in front of President Gligorov's office and to set up a communications link through our Liaison Office with Washington so that I could receive the formal diplomatic recognition correspondence immediately after it was signed by President Clinton. This was all done in an incredibly short period of time. We waited about 2-3 hours there in President Gligorov's anteroom. There was a festive mood. Finally the message came through authorizing me to present a letter of full diplomatic relations. I gave it to President Gligorov. He embraced me. I embraced him. We all toasted each other. We had one big hug around all of us. Within minutes it was announced on Macedonian radio. It was incredibly - just like New Year's Eve. All of a sudden, every horn of every car in Macedonia could be heard beeping. For them this was a big thing. This meant they'd finally arrived. When the United States had given them full diplomatic recognition, that meant they were a country. It was one of those grand, very emotional, very exciting moments for me personally as well as for the history of Macedonia.

Anyway, the agreement was signed but the devil remained in the details. The immediate results of the agreement was the political decision to lift the Greek embargo on Macedonia. But, there were still a number of steps that had to be taken to implement the new agreement and its customs related provisions. There also, I had an exciting and challenging task. I had to engage in direct diplomacy, often acting as an intermediary between the Greek delegation that was in Macedonia as well as the Macedonian government to finally put together the interim implementation procedures.

Q: I gather that the Vance-Okun-Nimitz agreement was all set and in a way the feeling is that Richard Holbrooke came around to grab the glory and put it together and really didn't finish it off? Is that what you're implying?

COMRAS: I will let anyone who listens to the story draw their own conclusions. I'm simply stating the facts as I know them. Holbrooke flew into Macedonia from Belgrade on an unscheduled trip that took place while both the chief of mission in Athens and the chief of mission in Skopje were not at their posts. While there he was able to get both sides to acknowledge agreement to the terms discussed earlier at Ohrid, and he was able to announce the agreement. Any other conclusions about these event must be left to further research and historical analysis.

Q: Richard Holbrooke at this time was Assistant Secretary for European Affairs.

COMRAS: That's correct.

Q: But you and Tom Niles weren't consulted.



COMRAS: No.

Q: What happened regarding the flag and the name of the country and all that?

COMRAS: Macedonia agreed to change the flag and it now uses a design which some have said looks very much like the Japanese battle flag. It no longer looks like the Star of Vergina. It is a very beautiful flag. There's a sun with rays on a red background. There were clear statements made in the text of the agreement that Macedonia had no intention of allowing any support from its territory for any activities that would run against the security of Greece and there was an agreement with respect to the use of disputed symbols. The two sides agreed they would continue to negotiate on the issue related to the name. Greece would continue to refer in its way to Macedonia and they agreed that differences with respect to the name would not otherwise inhibit their relationships.

Q: One area you hadn't mentioned - and I know because of the history - Bulgaria had a rather strong feeling about Macedonia and claiming that Macedonia was Bulgaria and territorial claims. Had that dissipated by this time?

COMRAS: No. These were all very real issues for Macedonia and for Bulgaria. There were so many different layers of issues. The country itself is so politically and ethnically complex. There are a number of groups, minorities and perspectives in Macedonia. There is a very large Albanian population. There is a significant group of people who believe that they are Bulgarian rather than Macedonian. I don't want to play that up too big. But it's not insignificant. There are those who view themselves as Serbs. The fact of the matter is that a fairly substantial number of Serbs settled in Macedonia when it was known as South Serbia just after the first Balkan wars. There is an enormous amount of intermarriage between the Macedonians and the other Yugoslav nationalities. The Macedonian language itself is an issue. And there is Bulgaria's historic claims to Macedonia. These claims date back before the Treaty of San Stephano when Bulgaria thought that it had gotten all of Macedonia incorporated into Bulgaria. That terms of that treaty, as you know, were later undone by the Conference of Berlin. The Bulgarians fought the Balkan wars in part to protect their claim to Macedonia. They fought the second Balkan war because they didn't get what they thought they should in the first Balkan war. They fought the First World War in part to get Macedonia back. They allied themselves with the Germans and fought in the Second World War in part to get Macedonia back. Probably those wars, and particularly World War II, convinced most Macedonians that they didn't want to be Bulgarian. The Bulgarian regime was tough on the Macedonians in terms of their culture, language, and other issues.



Recent Macedonian nationalism can be traced to the World War II period when Macedonians established their own underground to fight against the Bulgarians. Tito wisely, asked them to join him with the promise that he would give them an independent Macedonian republic at the end of the conflict. The Macedonian underground joined Tito on those terms. Tito, true to his promise, after World War II, created the Republic of Macedonia as one of the 5 republics of Yugoslavia. With Milosevic in power in Belgrade, and the disintegration of the rest of Yugoslavia, Macedonia decided on its own independence in 1991.

The Language issue had a life of its own. It became a barrier to normal relationship between Bulgaria and Macedonia. This was true even during the first part of my own stay in Skopje. They couldn't finalized any treaties or agreements between them because the Bulgarians would never accept that the agreement was produced in both Bulgarian and a Macedonian version. The Bulgarians maintained "There's only one language." This took on some tragic-comedy aspects when one of the cultural ministers of Bulgaria said, "Oh, no, Macedonian is only a Bulgarian dialect" just a couple of days before President Gligorov was scheduled to meet with the Bulgarian president in Sofia. So, when President Gligorov arrived in Sofia, he brought his translator. The Bulgarians wouldn't let the translator in the room. So Gligorov refused to enter also. The language issue is likely to remain for a long time. The Macedonians and Bulgarians did finally get around the treaty blockage by agreeing that each treaty would leave it to each side as to whether or not there were 2 languages or one language.

Bulgaria has renounced its territorial claims to Macedonia but continues to take a big interest in Macedonian issues.

There is also the Serbian factor. Serbia considered Macedonia to be South Serbia since the Balkan wars. Many in Serbia resisted Tito's actions creating a Macedonian republic. This included the Serbian Orthodox Church. They viewed Macedonia as a Tito creation. There are a lot of Serb nationalists who believe that Macedonia ought today be part of Serbia.

Then there is the Albanian issue. Around a quarter to a third of the people living in Macedonia are Albanian. This creates a strong tie-in to issues related to Albania and Kosovo.

There is also considerable tension between these various ethnic and political groupAll of this plays into the complexity of Macedonia's ethnic, cultural and political/historical mix.

Q: You were there from when to when?



COMRAS: I arrived in Skopje in the beginning of April of 1994 and I stayed until the summer of 1996. This was a very critical and event-filled period for Macedonia, and for our diplomatic mission. We grew from being a small two officer Liaison office into a full blown Embassy with all the trimmings. We established full diplomatic relations with Macedonia in September 1995, and received authority to upgrade the status of our mission to an embassy in February 1996. We officially opened our new embassy chancery building in May 1996 with Madeline Albright presiding over the ceremonies.

Q: What was your view of Gligorov as the head of this country?

COMRAS: Gligorov was something of a legend in his own time. He's a great man by any standard. He's truly the father of modern independent Macedonia. In my view he showed enormous courage and political wisdom. He was able to bring Macedonia out of Yugoslavia peacefully. He convinced the Albanians and the Macedonians that they had a similar stake in a peaceful Macedonia. He convinced the Macedonians that they had to move towards democracy, towards a market economy, towards recognition of their nation as a Western oriented country. He made it a high priority for Macedonia to do the necessary things to gain eventual full integration into Europe and into NATO. The force of his personality and character were very positive in bringing his country through an enormously difficult period and allowing it to survive against difficult odds.

Gligorov is also a very stubborn man who sometimes allowed his biases to complicate situations. Perhaps the most important serious consequences came from his strong distrust of the Greeks. He had this intense belief that issues such as flags and symbols were essential to the core of Macedonian statehood. He felt strongly attached to the symbols as symbols that define Macedonian nationalism. I found him to be almost intransigent and for long periods, on issues that seemed to have no real importance. Macedonia has not suffered from having a new flag, or from abandoning the use of certain symbols claimed by the Greeks.

While fending off the claims of his neighbors, Gligorov tried to steer a policy of polite friendliness and equidistance in his relations with all of his neighbors. He wanted to maintain the same kind of relationship with Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Serbia, and Turkey. He would call this the "policy of equidistance." "We'll be equally distant to each of these countries and equally cordial to each as well," he would say.

Q: Turkey, although it didn't have a common border, it still had a long history. Did that have any reflection in Macedonia?



COMRAS: Yes. Macedonian-Turkish relations were always very good. The one issue that sometimes created problems related to the Albania. Turkey wanted to be one of Albania's protectors in Europe. But the Turks were viewed as a potentially important investor and partner for Macedonia. Istanbul is an extremely important port for the whole south Balkan region. It has taken on great importance as a commercial entrance and exit point for Macedonia. This was especially the case when Thessaloniki was closed off to them during the embargo period. The Greek embargo did lead to an even more cordial relationship than might otherwise have been the case between Turkey and Macedonia.

Q: Thessaloniki would be the normal port for Macedonia and it was seen as problematic. Therefore you have a strong alternative.

COMRAS: Right. The port of Durres in Albania was insufficient to handle Macedonian needs. Also there was only a very poor road through the mountains connecting Macedonia to Durres. Istanbul became a much more important port for Macedonia.

Q: When you were there, what was the local Albanian situation and how did that play out?

COMRAS: The Albanian situation was one of the most challenging issues for Macedonia and for my own efforts to toward maintaining inter-ethnic peace and stability in Macedonia. Remember this was a period of grave risk and great uncertainty throughout the Balkan region. The Bosnian war was raging, conflict was simmering in Croatia, tensions were rising in Kosovo, Serbia was straining under sanctions, Macedonia was under severe political and economic pressure from Greece, and Macedonia's Slavic and Albanian populations were beginning to face off against each other. All those living in Macedonia felt the tension and insecurity that surrounded them.

A great many of the Albanians living in Macedonia can trace their roots there back for centuries. But many are also new arrivals. They moved to Macedonia during the 1980s Kosovo disturbances. Both groups were under great pressure from the Macedonian majority who feared and distrusted them. The Macedonian government refused to grant Macedonian citizenship to the more recent arrivals. This became a major bone of contention between the two communities. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia there was free movement across the Kosovo - Macedonia border. It was like moving between Maryland and Virginia. With the fall of Yugoslavia a new border was created between Kosovo (which was in Serbia) and Macedonia. The Kosovo and the Macedonian Albanian communities were closely linked by family, cultural and commercial ties. They viewed themselves as part of the same Albanian community during the Yugoslav period. Now they were being defined by the authorities as separate communities. They no longer had freedom of movement across that border, and the Albanians that had come into Macedonia felt they were being deprived of their status and civil rights.



The Macedonian government tried to define their citizenship in terms of how long they had been in Macedonia. This was an attempt to mask the real size of the Albanian minority in Macedonia.

The Macedonians held many of the same prejudices against the Albanians as the Serbs. They were worried about the political and national aspirations of the Albanians and what that might mean for Macedonia's own statehood and nationalism. Perhaps the tragedy in Bosnia served as a lesson to Macedonia and to its leadership that ethnic conflict could bring them only disaster and the possible loss of their newly won statehood. Macedonia's Slavic and Albanian leaders understood that the relationship between their two communities had to be managed carefully and that tensions had to be minimized. President Gligorov understood this and welcomed Albanian leaders into a participatory role in his government.

The Albanians also recognized that they had a stake in Macedonia's independence and that they were much better off in a liberal Democratic Macedonia seeking entry into mainstream Europe than they would ever be under Slobodan Milosevic's repressive nationalist regime in Belgrade. They accepted Gligorov's outstretched hand and took up various ministerial portfolios in the Macedonian Government.

The message I repeated over and over again to my Slavic Macedonian interlocutors at all levels of government and business was that they had to recognize that they had a limited window of opportunity which could close on them at any time.

During the period I was there (1994-1996) the Albanians in Macedonia had no desire to join up with their brethren in Kosovo. It was evident to them at that point in time that those in Kosovo really had it much worse. If anything, they were afraid of seeing Milosevic take control again in Macedonia. They didn't want to have a Belgrade regime dominating events in Macedonia. They didn't have any desire to hook up with Albania. Nor did they want to hook up with Albania which was really a political and economic basket case during that period. What they wanted, and what they needed, was to feel secure in their own towns and villages in Macedonia.

This is why the UN peacekeeping mission in Macedonia was so important. This is why it was critical that Americans were there along with the Scandinavians. The Albanian community leaders knew that so long as these forces were there, the Serbs would not be able to move south into Macedonia. Both communities believed that the Americans and the Scandinavians also would not encourage growing internal strife between their communities, nor allow the internal situation to get too much out of hand. This gave them at least a minimum sense of security, and a willingness to try and work together. The presence of the UN was really critical to allowing both groups to sleep at night.



But, the situation was fragile at best. We all knew that Kosovo could blow up at any moment and change everything. If Kosovo erupted, it would (and did) have enormous implications for Macedonia. Also the situation would also change over time in Albania itself, perhaps turning Albania into a more important pole of attraction for Macedonia's Albanians.

It was imperative that the Macedonian government recognized, and work toward making the Albanian minority recognize that had a stake in a peaceful and stable Macedonia.

There were at least four matters that the Macedonian government had to address to great urgency if they were to keep the Albanians within the fold of a Macedonian state.

The first was the Albanian language issue. The Macedonian Slavs had to recognize the importance of language and culture to the Albanians. They were not ever going to be able to turn the Albanians into Macedonian Slavs. They would always be Macedonian Albanians. The best they assure they would become cooperative citizens within Macedonia was to recognize their language and cultural identity, and to give it some standing within Macedonia. This meant providing ample educational opportunities from primary school through University in both languages.

Q: You might point out that the Albanian language and the Macedonian language are quite different.

COMRAS: Very different. Macedonian is a Slavic dialect. Albanian (also known as shqip) is a distinct proto-indo-European language.

The second major issue is education. The Albanians in Macedonia have legitimate grievances regarding insufficient government support for education in their communities. Education is essential and the Albanian communities must be given their fair share for schools, teachers and supplies.

The third issue is Jobs. They've got to have their share in the economy and in the government and in the government positions.

The fourth is public works. They must be given their fair share also for community service construction, roads and other public works. The Albanian villages are among the poorest in Macedonia. This process is also assisted by the fact that many Albanians have families elsewhere in Europe and the United States that are also sending back remittances to assist the local economies. I was always surprised to see how many houses were under private construction. Albanian workers, returning from their overseas jobs were slowly building themselves houses - a little bit each summer.



These are the key four issues. When Macedonian government works to address them, they make progress in dealing with the Albanian community. Both communities benefit. If they hold back, and concentrate only on their Macedonian constituency the whole country will suffer.

I should say that many Macedonians did not agree with the four points I was making. They maintained that anything that reenforces Albanian education and culture will also reenforce Albanian separatism. They believe that this will only lead to a division of their country, and that the Albanians will eventually try to go off on their own. While that might be a long term scenario, it was not a realistic perspective in the short term. That is why it is so important for the Macedonian majority to ensure that the Albanian minority has a real positive stake in Macedonia.

One of the main incidents that peaked tensions between the two communities was the Albanian decision to establish their own Albanian Language University in Tetevo. The initial reaction of the Macedonian government was to take it down - by force, if necessary. That turned out to be a major fiasco that almost caused civil war. However, moderate leaders on both sides prevailed. The government pulled its forces back. Rather than confront the Albanians on the issue, they merely declared the University as illegal and without any official recognition. Subsequently, the University was folded into the established Education framework, but that came many years after I left Skopje.

The history behind the creation of the Albanian is instructive. During the Yugoslav era, the University of Pristina, in Kosovo, served as the principal Albanian language University. There was also a University of Tirana in Albania, but that was off-limits for Yugoslav Albanians until the fall of the Hoxa regime. Slobodan Milosevic, as part of his repression of the Kosovo Albanians closed their schools, as well as the University of Pristina. This meant that there were no University level courses taught in Albanian open to the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia.

The Albanian Community in Macedonia approached President Gligorov with the request that he establish a Albanian language Teachers College at the University of Skopje. They reasoned that the Macedonian Constitution envisaged Albanian language schools in Albanian communities at least through secondary school. However, this required the availability of trained teachers who could teach in Albanian. Gligorov agreed in principle, but, unfortunately, adopted a 'go slow' approach. When the Macedonian government finally decided to create a pedagogic institute, a school to train teachers in Albanian, the chancellor of the university resisted the decision. He had other development plans for the University. They should have thrown him out right away and put in a new rector, but they hesitated and it became a political issue.

The Albanians needed a university somewhere. They had a number of unemployed professors from the University of Pristina. So they decided to raise some money within their own community and do their own thing. The Macedonian government over-reacted and a crisis was born.



The initial government reaction was to try to destroy it by knocking down the classroom buildings and declaring the school illegal. They created a major crisis. They had nobody on their side. I played a direct hand in bringing them around to a more reasonable approach. I warned Gligorov that "If you're ever going to aspire to being part of Europe, part of Western political institutions, then you've got to stop this action. I argued that education was a human right and that the steps the government was taking were not consistent with its stated policies on these issues. Nor were they conducive to support from the United States or the European Union. After all, the University was a private undertaking, on private property and did not engage the Macedonian government in any way. I told him that while he had the right to deny the University any official character or charter, and did not have to accredit it or assist it in any way, it would be a big mistake to try and destroy it or make it a criminal act to attend. The pressure I put on Gligorov, in the name of the United States, helped him decide to pull back and to establish a policy of ignoring the University, which his government simply declared "illegal."

Eventually the Macedonian government began to tolerate the University. Several years after I left Macedonia, then President Boris Boris Trajkovski signed a decree approving the University of Tetovo as a multilingual institution. I'm proud to say that I was a positive force in resolving this sensitive issue.

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Q: Today is May 5, 2003. Maybe we should talk about the whole Kosovo thing.

COMRAS: I'd like to do that. In June 1996 I left Skopje and went to the University of Pittsburgh, where I was a diplomat in residence. But, I continued to watch the events in Yugoslavia very closely. This included the aftermath of Dayton, what was going on in Bosnia, Kosovo, and, of course, Macedonia.

Up until June 1996 I was a participant in shaping or dealing with many of these events. From 1996 until late 1998, I was just an interested observer. In late 1998 I was asked by James Dobbins to join his team and to handle the sanctions related to the Kosovo war.

You know, in the role of an observer you get to be even more critical of what's going on than when you are a participant. I watched with great interest, and a great deal of skepticism, as the post-Dayton scenario unfolded in Bosnia. I am thankful that it turned out a lot better than I would have thought. In my view the credit goes more to SFOR than to the agreements worked out in Dayton. They provided the security force necessary to secure the peace in Bosnia and to get the warring faction forces back into their barracks.



There was much less success in providing for a stable Bosnian government that would be able to reintegrate the country. Train and equip also fell largely by the wayside. The Bosnian economy remained (and remains today) in shambles. There is still no timetable for eventual IFOR troop withdrawal. But, nevertheless, due mostly to IFOR continuing force presence - and the presence of U.S. forces well beyond the one year that was initially envisaged by President Clinton - stability was maintained. But, there was a price to pay. And one price was to strengthen, rather than pull down, Milosevic in Serbia.

Milosevic used the aftermath of the Bosnian conflict to strengthen his own hand as an international player. He became an essential interlocutor with respect to events in Bosnia, he was able to serve his own purposes and interests, and he was able to strengthen his repressive regime in Serbia and in Kosovo. Following Dayton, our diplomats traveled more and more to Belgrade to talk with Milosevic about events related to Bosnia and to get his accord or support for our various projects there.

Dayton overlooked the Kosovo issue. It pushed the question of Kosovo aside. Rather, our policy was to retain what became known as an outer wall of sanctions pending resolution of several issues in Serbia, including the Kosovo question. This outer wall of sanctions didn't amount to much except for limitations on direct government and international assistance to the Milosevic regime in Serbia.

During the Bosnian war, Kosovo lost its autonomy and became the subject of a direct repressive regime from Belgrade.

The story of Milosevic and Kosovo starts in April 1987 when Yugoslav President Ivan Stambolic sent Sloba to pacify the restive Serbs in Kosovo. Tensions had risen between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo soon after Tito's death. Albanians constituted the majority living in Kosovo and Albanians dominated the local Communist Party apparatus. But the Serbs were very distrustful of the Albanians and complaining of discriminatory treatment.

Kosovo holds an important place in Serbian history and lore, and Serbia has always had a very strong emotional tie to the province, which once had a majority Serb population. That changed during and after the Second World War as a result of the settling of additional Albanian families moved into the region during the Second World War and the expulsion of Serb families. Following the war the Serbian exodus continued, heightened again by civil disturbances in the early 1980s.



The Serbians wanted to curb the domination of the province by Albanians. They believed this could be accomplished by withdrawing Kosovo's autonomy and allowing the Serbs to benefit politically from the vast Serbian majority in Serbia (of which Kosovo was a part). Milosevic was directed by Stambolic to meet with the Serbs and to ask them to show patience and cooperation vis a vis the Albanian Communist party leadership. Milosevic reportedly broke away from his meeting with ethnic Albanians to mingle with an angry crowd of Serbians in a suburb of Pristina. This was his opening to play his new "Serbian Nationalist" card.

His actions in Kosovo served as a marker in Yugoslav history that the Tito era was over and that Serbs, who constituted a majority of all Yugoslavs, would now be free again to demonstrate their own nationalistic inclinations. This helped set the stage for the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars that followed.

Milosevic easily won the support of the Serbian nation in Kosovo and elsewhere, and released a penned up nationalism that stormed across Yugoslavia. This force propelled him into a firm leadership position in Serbia as he pushed aside Stambolic. It also had a direct impact on growing Slovene, Croat, Macedonian, Bosnian, and Albanian nationalism throughout the region.

With his rise to power Milosevic moved quickly to suspend Kosovo autonomy and to impose direct rule from Belgrade. The Albanians lost their control of the province. They were forced out of the government, out of the bureaucracy, out of the police, and out of the schools. They began to establish their own parallel institutions in order to provide basic order, education and daily requirements for their community. Kosovo became a police state controlled and patrolled by special Serbian police.

The deteriorating situation in Kosovo led President Bush, on December 29, 1992 to issue his famous Christmas warning. Having obtained intelligence that Milosevic was planning to use military force in Kosovo, the Bush Administration warned Milosevic through diplomatic channels that the U.S. was prepared to take unilateral military action, without European cooperation, if the Serbs sparked a new conflict in Kosovo or Macedonia. These were real concerns. Many believed that Milosevic intended to use the JNA (the Serbian Army) to escalate and extend the Bosnian conflict into these areas. What was meant to be a private message was quickly and widely reported in the Press.

It was never clear what the Christmas warning really meant or how we intended to back it up. But President Clinton acted quickly to give the Bush warning credence. Plans were made during the final days of the Bush administration and then into the Clinton administration to place American soldiers in Yugoslavia for the first time. They were to be stationed along the Macedonia border with Serbia as part of what was then the UNPROFOR mission in Macedonia. UNPROFOR was the first experiment in deploying a preventive peacekeeping force. The initial force of 300 soldiers grew to almost 1,000.



The inclusion of American forces in UNPROFOR Macedonia was meant to send a clear message to Milosevic that if he did cross that line with Military action iKosovo or Macedonia he might have to engage American soldiers directly. While the force contingent there was mostly symbolic, engaging even a small American force could lead the U.S. to become directly engaged in the conflict. This was something Milosevic wanted to avoid. Milosevic seemed to heed that warning at the time. He did not make any significant military incursions into Kosovo and he did not make any at all into Macedonia. There were a couple of border issues that arose in the years that followed but nothing terribly serious. This remained the situation until the Dayton accords were concluded. But the situation began to change shortly after the Dayton Accords.

During the Bosnian war Serbia conducted a number of police actions in Kosovo and continued to institute a very repressive regime. However, he choose to tolerate the Albanian creation of parallel institutions to handle Albanian affairs in the province. It was clear, however, that Albanians had lost basic civil and human rights.

We were very concerned about this deteriorating human rights situation. And we used our efforts to place additional pressure on Milosevic to relax his repressive measures and to restore autonomy to the region. This became one of the conditions for sanctions removal. As I said earlier, some of these sanctions ostensibly were to continue after the Dayton accords as what was called the outer wall of sanctions. These included certain air traffic rights and steps restricting assistance for economic development such as international financial assistance, international loans and guarantees, other things that might help the Serbs come out of the big hole that they had dug for themselves during the sanctions period and the war. These outer sanctions were to be held in place to deal with the Kosovo issue as well as other human rights questions.

I was already greatly concerned, as were many others closely following the situation in Yugoslavia, that the U.S. had relaxed too many elements of the sanctions already at the outset of Dayton and had done so without establishing appropriate benchmarks for fulfillment of the Dayton obligations. We advised that the sanctions should be relaxed only as these various Dayton commitments were being fulfilled. But, this is not what happened. At Holbrooke's insistence, the sanctions were suspended at the beginning of Dayton and were formally lifted on the signature of the accord.

The Albanian leaders in Kosovo watched the Dayton meeting closely. They were quite upset that a return to Kosovo autonomy was not included in the Dayton agenda. They were also very upset to see that the principal economic sanctions on Serbia were being tied only to Bosnia and not to progress also on issues related to Kosovo.

Q: Did you get the feeling that there was a Dayton crew at the State Department who were living in euphoria and didn't want any complications, they had done that and wanted to move on?



COMRAS: Yes, I think that's right. I think there was a great sense of relief and accomplishment in the State Department, and within the Clinton Administration when the Dayton Accords were signed. The ending of the fighting in Bosnia was a great accomplishment. There was a determination in the State Department to move forward with implementation as quickly as possible. Discussions were focused on how to keep progress moving forward in Bosnia. Bosnia was the biggest issue on the table and had the highest priority, even when it came to dealing with related Balkan issues.

I must admit that the fulfillment of some aspects of the Dayton Accords went much smoother and faster than I had anticipated. This was particularly so with regard to the military aspects and getting the warring armies back into their barracks.

Bob Gelbard took over from Richard Holbrooke as the person responsible in the State Department for overseeing implementation of the accords. He became our representative to the Contact Group. As you know Holbrooke left the government shortly after the accords to pursue private interests.

One of the first problems Gelbard faced was the continued entrenchment of the more radical Bosnian Serb nationalist leadership including Radovan Karadzic and his military chief, General Ratko Mladic. Their supporters retained control in the Serbska Republic and continued to thwart positive movement at the Federal level in Sarajevo. The Administration very much wanted to see progress on implementing Dayton's political provisions. This was not possible as long as the radicals retained political control. One of Bob's goals, therefore, was to promote new and more moderate leadership within the Bosnian Serb community as well as within the Croat and Muslim communities. This was essential to future political development at the federal level and for the country's future political stability. The hope was that we could get such moderate leaders to begin to work together to heal some of the wounds and move the country forward. Gelbard and his team believed that Biljana Plavcic could help us accomplish this. Mrs. Plavcic had served at one time as Karadzic's Vice President. While she was also tainted with radical Bosnian nationalism during the war (and subsequently voluntarily faced sentencing for war crimes at the Hague) she had already broken with Karadzic and stacked out a more moderate line. At that moment she seemed to be the answer - the moderate who could garner sufficient support to represent the Bosnian Serb community in the new government. But, she first needed to gain the support of the Bosnian Serb Parliament.



The road to promoting Plavcic's leadership ran directly through Belgrade, as it did for so many of the Bosnian issues. Milosevic had become the essential arbiter for any issue dealing with the Bosnian Serbs. Plavcic was clearly not one of his favorites, but for a price he would be willing to play ball. Gelbard had to work out a deal with Milosevic in order to get his help to get Plavcic elected by the Bosnian Serb Parliament as RS Acting President. In return for his support on Plavcic, the United States began to relax some of the outer-wall sanctions that were held over after Dayton. We indicated that this might include letting the Yugoslav national airline begin to fly, and we began to entertain the possibility of providing some assistance directly to Serbia.

I must say that this sent some very negative signals to the Albanian leadership in Kosovo. The Kosovo Albanians began to perceive our policy as Bosnia-centric. It appeared that we would be satisfied with Milosevic so long as the Dayton track moved forward in Bosnia. We appeared to be less and less interested in events in Kosovo and more and more eager to simply get out of the Balkans. These signals could not have come to the Albanians at a worse time.

The Albanians were also closely watching the Palestinian Intifada and the attention it drew to events in the Middle East. Some of the more radical leaders began to think that an Albanian Intifada in Kosovo might serve to draw world attention back to Kosovo.

Before the Plavcic issue there had appeared to be some progress being made on Kosovo issues due to the work of the Sant'Egido Community. This became known as the Sant'Egido process.

The Sant'Egido Community became involved in Kosovo in 1996 at the request of Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova. Rugova was very let down with the Dayton Accords, and with the absence of any language in the accords concerning Kosovo. He turned to the Sant'Egidio Community to assist him in finding ways to deal with the Serbs and to obtain some kind of humanitarian accord that would ease the harsh humanitarian conditions under which the Kosovo Albanians continued to live. Sant'Egidio concentrated its efforts on seeking an accord that would get the Serbian government to reopen the schools and reached an accord on September 2, 1996 to reopen the Albanian primary and secondary schools. Further work was also underway to reopen the University of Pristina. This looked like an important breakthrough and it gave rise to some optimism that maybe further progress would be achieved regarding a new post-Dayton status for Kosovo.



But it just may be that the gestures that we made to Milosevic regarding the Plavsic deal - and signs that we were willing to lift remaining sanctions in return for progress in Bosnia on implementing the Dayton Accords - sent a wrong signal to Milosevic concerning our interest in Kosovo. Milosevic may have believed that so long as he behaved in Bosnia and did our bidding and helped us in what we wanted to do in Bosnia, he would keep us happy. He may have felt that his cooperation on Bosnia would give him a free hand elsewhere. Besides, the Americans were already beginning to show increased concerns about international terrorism. Milosevic might well have thought that he could place a "terrorist" label on the increasingly radical Albanians in Kosovo who were just beginning with their own "intifada." Milosevic may have concluded that the Americans were simply less interested in Kosovo than they were in Bosnia.

This scenario is supported by the fact that Milosevic quickly changed course regarding the September 2, 1996 school agreement. The Serbs simply didn't do what they said they would do. The schools remained closed, and negotiations on reopening the University stalled. There was little or no reaction to this from anywhere in the international community. The deadlines came and passed and nothing happened. It wasn't that Milosevic disowned the agreement. He just didn't do anything to implement it.

Milosevic appeared to be at the height of his power. But, then we were all surprised by major anti-Milosevic demonstrations that broke out in Belgrade in December 1996. Milosevic had called for local elections expecting to win big. However, the results proved the contrary. Milosevic moved quickly to manipulate the outcome and to claim victory in every major city in Serbia. This farce was so evident, however, that the opposition was able to turn out millions of demonstrations in Belgrade and across Serbia. It looked as if Milosevic might be facing his final days in power. But, the demonstrations ran their course without any real international support or intervention. Milosevic conceded a few local elections and rode out the storm. He spent his next several months shaking up his own government and resecuring his hold on Serbia's political processes. Having survived this challenge, he emerged stronger than ever. He also decided to reenforce his political base by appealing again to Serbian nationalism. He again used the growing threat of Albanian rebellion in Kosovo as a new Serbian cause celebre.

Starting in October 1997 the Albanians began to demonstrate against Milosevic's failure to implement the school agreement. Their anger rose with each demonstration. "We had an agreement, they chanted, but nothing's happened." Albanian Students began to carry out a "protest walk" around the university every night. They would circle the university peacefully, carrying placards and shouting slogans. They wanted to give some exposure to Milosevic's failure to implement the school agreement.

Milosevic didn't seem to care. He was continuing to make us happy on Bosnia, and we really weren't reacting to what was happening in Kosovo.



On March 2nd 1998 Serbian police charged into the demonstrators and began a new crackdown. The following day I went to the Office of the then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs. I remember telling her that "Today is the first day of a new Kosovo war." Unfortunately, I had it right!

Meanwhile, events in Macedonia were also on a downward spiral. Relations between the Macedonian government and the Albanian minority were deteriorating rapidly. The incident sparking the problem related to an Albanian cultural event in the town of Gostivar. To mark the occasion an Albanian flag was raised alongside the Macedonian flag in front of the local city hall. Macedonian police overreacted and sent in a police squad to tear the Albanian flag down. This set off a local demonstration which rapidly grew in size. The Macedonian police called for reinforcements and the demonstration grew even bigger. The Macedonians ended up by arresting a number of local Albanian leaders, some of which were sentenced to several years in prison. This proved to be a major setback for inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia.

I was surprised that our Ambassador did little to calm the situation. In fact, his report to Washington seemed to lay the blame squarely on the Albanians and to vindicate the overreaction of the Macedonian police and the strong prison sentences handed out by the government. I indicated my disagreement at the time. I believed that rather than take sides on this issue, our role should have been to act as honest brokers to calm relations between the two communities. To my mind the long prison sentences meted out by the Macedonian government were outrageous under the circumstances. The costs for these actions became much clearer subsequently.

Q: What was your job at this point?

COMRAS: In 1997 I was serving as the Senior State Department Coordinator for Holocaust Asset Restitution. I had just returned from the University of Pittsburgh where I spent a year as Diplomat-in-residence.

Q: Were you keeping your hand in?

COMRAS: I guess you might say that I remained an interested observer during this whole period. Anybody who wanted my opinion got it whether they wanted it or not. I did all I could to keep abreast of the issues. I felt that I had been exiled from those dealing with Yugoslavia because of my Dayton related criticisms.



Anyway, getting back to my story. Events continue to get worse in Kosovo. The Serbian police were cracking down on Albanian demonstrators, and more and more Albanian students were turning to more and more radical paths to respond. The Sant'Egidio process was failing and support for an Albanian intifada was growing. More and more Albanians were abandoning Rogova's stated policies of peaceful (non violent) protest.

A new Albanian force began to emerge in Kosovo. It was known as the UCK or Kosovo Liberation Army. While we certainly did not support their activities, they were becoming a force to be reckoned with. I think we made a big mistake, however, when we referred to them as "terrorists." If they were terrorists, then Milosevic could feel justified in dealing with them as terrorists. This appeared to give him an okay to take a freer hand in dealing with them. He began to ratchet up military action in response. The Christmas Warning was about to be tested.

Serbian military units began to deploy in Kosovo and against the UCK. The Serbian authorities used the excuse of UCK activities to step up their repression of the Albanian community in Kosovo. They had great difficulty knowing which Albanians were UCK and which were not. So they went around Kosovo like the forces of Simon de Monfort in the 13th Century Albagenisan crusade. When Simon de Monfort asked the Abbot of Ceteaux, the Papal legate, what he was to do with the inhabitants, the legate answered "Kill them all. God knows his own." The Serbian forces shot first and asked questions later. More and more Albanian villages went up in smoke. Kosovo was becoming a new major Balkan crisis.

The Contact group was still concentrating on Bosnia and was slow to pick up on the growing Kosovo crisis. Things were going somewhat better in Bosnia, and there was a reluctance to place new pressures on Milosevic. Our contact group representative, Bob Gelbard was sent to Belgrade to deliver a message to Milosevic that he needed to cool-it in Kosovo. When he arrived in Belgrade Milosevic refused to see him. This represented a very dramatic turning point. Milosevic was determined to move ahead in Kosovo, and try to cash-in on our evident Bosnia-centricity.

Here was the envoy of U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright - the person who was our lead person on Balkan issues - coming to talk to Milosevic about Kosovo and Milosevic wouldn't see him. What should have been our response? Well, I don't think we got it right. Instead of a strong response, we tried a conciliatory one. If Milosevic wouldn't see Gelbard, maybe he would consent to see Richard Holbrooke, the architect of the Dayton Accords. Milosevic and Holbrooke already had a very established relationship. Perhaps Holbrooke could turn him around.



I don't think that was the right answer to take out Gelbard and substitute Holbrooke. Holbrooke was smart enough to know that he had to keep Gelbard in toe. So, they both went to see Milosevic in early May 1998. One result was to undermine Bob Gelbard's own role and credibility with the Serbian leader. He preferred to deal with Holbrooke, who he knew as a dealmaker. From this point on Gelbard's position was marginalized. Holbrooke would take the lead in a new round of shuttle diplomacy between Belgrade, Washington and Pristina.

I think we should have stood behind Gelbard from the start and read Milosevic the riot act directly from Washington if Milosevic continued to refuse to see him. We should have raised the ante - not waited for Milosevic to raise the ante. We shouldn't have appeared to be going to Milosevic to get his accord. We should have made him back-down at the outset!

It should have been clear that the Christmas warning remained valid, and that continued military action in Kosovo would be met with a forceful response. Instead we got involved in a drawn out negotiating game with Milosevic playing all sides - feigning, and then withdrawing concessions, and continuing to carry out his military actions. Looking back, we can see that the crisis continued to go downhill for the next 14 months. And so much damage had already been done when we finally decided to intervene with force.

But let's go back to the beginnings of this new round of Holbrooke diplomacy. After a full round of shuttle diplomacy Holbrooke concluded a deal with Milosevic involving a package of measures which was to include an immediate cessation of military police actions in Kosovo and direct talks between Milosevic and Rogovo's Albanian governing council. That sounded good but it was disastrous!

The Rogovo government was absolutely shocked and felt betrayed by Holbrooke's agreement with Milosevic. Milosevic had always said he was willing to have Rogovo come to Belgrade to talk with him directly. After all he knew that it would be like the Lion talking with the mouse. What leverage could Rogovo, or his colleagues bring to the table in Belgrade? They knew they would be at a great disadvantage in such discussions. Besides, they didn't trust Milosevic at all. Following the Sant Egidio negotiations, and in other talks, it had become clear to them that Milosevic couldn't be held to his word in any of these agreements. The Rogovo council position had always been clear - They wanted negotiations with the Serbs under international auspices. The power and the pressure on the Serbian government couldn't come from the Rogovo council. It had to come from the international community. The Albanians had always looked to the contact group, or international organizations to sponsor any discussions regarding Kosovo. Only under such a formula could the Albanians have any possibility of gaining concessions from Milosevic. In direct negotiations their position would always be very tenuous.

They saw the Holbrooke - Milosevic agreement as a serious set-back for this strategy.



Despite their protests we put them under enormous pressure to form a delegation and to go to Belgrade for such talks. They continued to refuse to join in what they viewed would only be charade in Belgrade. So we ratcheted up the pressure on them and threatened to leave them to their on to deal with increased Serb violence in the province.

The Rogovo council faced a real internal crisis. Rogovo finally caved in to our pressure and agreed to form a delegation to go to Belgrade. But many of the members of his council resigned. And many of his supporters began to shift their allegiance to the UCK. We tried to soften the blow by promising that we would include international observers in the talks and closely observe the negotiations. Rogovo wanted Holbrooke there. He didn't get him. We assigned the observer task to the Director of the Office in the State Department responsible for the Balkans, James Swiggart. Subsequently that role was transferred to our Ambassador in Skopje, Christopher Hill.

The discussions in Belgrade were a real fiasco. Milosevic made only a brief appearance. The real discussions took place at a much lower level. A second meeting was scheduled, but never occurred. In the meantime fighting had intensified in Kosovo and the Rogovo government was being deserted by more and more of its members. It became increasingly clear that neither side had anything to bring to a negotiating table. The Albanians didn't trust Milosevic to carry out any commitments. And it was apparent also that the Rogovo government had lost its own ability to speak for the Kosovo Albanian community.

However, the contact group was not willing to recognize the failure of the process. Rather than abandon this approach, Christopher Hill and Wolfgang Petritsch, the Austrian ambassador to Belgrade, representing the EU, began their own shuttle diplomacy between Belgrade and Pristina. They concentrated on negotiating a framework agreement that would include basic documents related to political and civil institutions in Kosovo.

I have to say that this became a very ludicrous operation, especially against the background of increased fighting in Kosovo, the deterioration of the Rogovo council, the increasing importance of the UCK (and their absence from the process), and the failure of Milosevic to live up to any of his concessions. It was time to call Holbrooke back into the fray.

Holbrooke carried a very stern message to Milosevic. He was directed to make it clear that we were heading toward possible military action. NATO aircraft began to over fly Kosovo. We also began to build up NATO forces in Macedonia.



Holbrooke's instructions were to tell Milosevic that, in order to avoid NATO intervention he had to agree to the introduction of international peacekeeping mission in Kosovo which would include uniform military peacekeepers. Unfortunately, Holbrooke produced something far less. He made an agreement with Milosevic that did not include military peacekeepers. I'm never quite sure whether that was within the realm of the instructions that he had been given or how that played through.

The outcome was a completely civilian peace monitoring mission. It was to be based on the lines of other EU monitoring missions in the region. There would be no armed military elements within the mission. Holbrooke explained that Milosevic absolutely refused to allow any foreign military presence in Kosovo.

I think the mission assigned to the new peace monitoring group was one of the most challenging in history. The mission had an impossible task. They worked hard and honorably. And they reported truthfully on what was going on. But, they were helpless to stem a deteriorating situation. They became the witnesses themselves to growing issues and atrocities. In the meantime Christopher Hill and Wolfgang Petritsch were continuing on their shuttle missions to work out a political framework agreement.

In December 1998 I wrote a memorandum to then Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Marc Grossman regarding my concerns about the negotiating process on Kosovo. I told them I thought the Christopher Hill shuttle mission should be ended. I suggested that we convene an all - Albanian party conference to forge a unity governing council in Kosovo and that we establish a common Nato - Kosovo Council negotiating position paper which should be used in a new round of negotiations held outside of Yugoslavia. The new negotiating paper would be subject to discussion and appropriate revision, but would have the weight of NATO behind it. While Grossman found my paper intriguing, he admitted that he little influence on what was going on with our Yugoslav policies at the time. He promised to convey my memo to others.

Apparently, our Yugoslav team had already decided on a somewhat different course. They did not believe that we should appear to choose sides in the Kosovo crisis. Nor did they favor our working out a Kosovo unity council.

Christopher Hill suggested a somewhat different approach. He wanted to call for an international conference to bring the Albanians and the Serbian Government together to hammer an agreement out under international auspices. I think that's where we should have been at the outset - about a year earlier. But, I believed it was much too late for that now. Anyway, Hill's ideas led to the convening of the Rambouillet Conference.

Q: That was the name of the site in France.



COMRAS: That's right. The Kosovo conference was held at Rambouillet, just outside of Paris. The meeting was ostensibly presided over by the French and British Foreign Ministers as the selected representatives of the Contact Group. In fact, most of the negotiations at the conference were handled by Christopher Hill and Wolfgang Petritsch. Slobodan Milosevic never attended the conference. He sent his Foreign Minister instead.

The conference opened with great fanfare, and the presence of just about all of the Foreign Ministers of the Contact Group countries. There were solemn speeches on the need to deal with the issues and work out a resolution. But, the conference went downhill from their.

It was a very unique conference. It dealt with issues of war and peace. It dealt with headline issues of confrontation seriously involving the interests of the United States, Europe, the Balkans and world peace. But, just about the full contingent of Foreign Ministers left at the outset. The conference was left to be handled by mid-level diplomats who lacked direction or authority.

The Albanian delegation was badly fractured among Rogovo and UCK supporters. The Serbian delegation had no authority to deal. They had to refer everything back to Slobodon Milosevic.

The Albanians hadn't worked out a common position and lacked both a common position and common goals. These ranged from those who insisted on complete Kosovo independence to those willing to accept some form of autonomy. The conference was another complete diplomatic and substantive disaster. The international press saw it for the disaster that it was. The Serbs saw it for the disaster that it was. They took advantage of the discord among the Albanians and were able to leave the conference looking as though they had tried to make a deal, but the Albanians were the hold-outs. When the conference finally broke without any positive result, the blame game began. The contact group realized they needed to develop a common position and hammer out agreement on that position with the Albanians before they could move forward. That meant getting the Albanians to agree among themselves - something I had recommended in my December 1998 memo.

Well, anyway here we were with a deteriorating crisis. Slobo's troops were increasingly active in Kosovo. New Serbian troops were massing along the border. NATO plans were stepping up their over flights. New NATO contingents were moving into Macedonia. Against this background we convened a second Rambouillet Conference. And this time there was a common position presented to the Serbs on a take it or leave it basis. We laid down that kind of line at Rambouillet along with the demand for military armed peacekeepers. It was rejected.

In response to the Serbian rejection, and continued Serbian military operations in Kosovo, We began to carry out a limited air campaign against Serbian forces in Kosovo. We also began to have bombing runs into Serbia proper. A war had begun.



The Kosovo War was conducted from the air. We targeted Serbian troop movements as well as certain support facilities - roads, bridges, supply trains, communications facilities and oil. Serbia has no oil production of its own and relies on imported oil. We view oil as their Achilles, especially when it comes to military activities.

But, as fast as we were knocking out Serbia's oil reserves, Serbia was importing new oil, mainly via barge along the Danube. We had gone to war without seeking to impose any new controls on the flow of oil to Serbia. In fact the only sanctions that were in place at the beginning of the war were the leftover outer wall measures from the Bosnian conflict.

I was always surprised by the fact that we never pushed for new sanctions on Serbia during the run-up to the Kosovo war. Anyway, only after the air war had commenced did we consider what should be done to stop the flow of new oil into Serbia.

At the time I was serving as the Director of the Office of Canadian Affairs. While I was not directly involved in the Kosovo issue, I continued to make my views known via memos, email and hall and office conversations.

At the moment the war began I was also preoccupied by the decision to move the Office of Canadian Affairs from the European Bureau into the an expanded Bureau of Western Hemispheric Affairs. Our office was no longer with the European. It was now with the Bureau that handled our relations with Latin America.

To my great surprise, I received a call from the EUR people to come around and talk to James Dobbins and James Pardue (his deputy) about what was going on in Kosovo. They asked my advice and assistance on developing and implementing a new sanctions program on Serbia. With my agreement they requested that the Western Hemispheric Affairs Bureau release me as Director of the Office of Canadian Affairs so that I could work full time on this project. I guess my exile had come to an end. What started off as a temporary position became a permanent position on Jim Dobbins' staff.

Our first sanctions priority was to stop the oil moving to Serbia. This was to prove a very difficult task - especially so as we were operating without any new UN Security Council resolution upon which to base such sanctions. We also faced the same kinds of problems that plagued the application of sanctions on the Danube during the Bosnian war period. The Danube enjoys a strict freedom of navigation and commerce status. And without a UN Security Council resolution it was going to be difficult to get countries to abridge a right guaranteed in the Danube Convention. Remember, the Kosovo war was a NATO action, not a UN action.



Our problem was to convince the Romanian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian governments to stop the flow of oil up the Danube to Serbia. Most of this oil was coming from Russia. And Russia itself was disinclined to cut off the flow. The Russian people were already expressing great sympathy for the Serbians in this war.

I formed up a new interagency negotiating team involving both the State Department and the Defense Department. We traveled together to Bucharest, Sofia and Kiev to see what could be done. We needed to get agreement from the Romanians and the Bulgarians to work together to cut off the oil flow. They sought to deflect the pressure we put on them and argued that we had to go directly to the Ukrainians and the Russians to stop the oil at the source. But we knew that wouldn't work. We just had to continue to keep the pressure on the Romanians and the Bulgarians, and to play on their stated interest in eventually becoming NATO members.

We also played on their concerns regarding the possible damage done to the Danube and their riverbeds from oil contamination. After-all, a war was going on and we could not guarantee that oil barges on the Danube would not be hit!. What if a barge train on the river was at the wrong place at the wrong time during a river raid. Can you imagine what that would do to the river with all that oil going down the river? Can you imagine what that would do to the ecology of the Danube River and to the region?

I think these issues weighed heavily on the responsible Bulgarian and Romanian authorities. They had their lawyers look closely at the terms of the Danube Convention and agreed that they could take appropriate regulatory steps, under the situation, to insure against such a river disaster. They agreed to turn back any oil barges that might be heading into the war zone.

Once the agreement was in place, and reported. We left the region to return to Washington via London. While in London we received the good news that Serbia had just caved and signed a Military Technical Agreement to end the fighting. I think this was around June 9, 1999. We joked among ourselves that as soon as Sloba heard that he wasn't going to get any more oil, he caved in. But it was still a great undertaking and the team was very pleased with the outcome of it. The issue then became, "What now?"

The Clinton Administration had finally decided that Milosevic had to go. President Clinton made it clear that the U.S. and its allies would not assist or deal with the Milosevic government and that we would work through peaceful means to foster democratic regime change. So what about the sanctions. The first inclination among the U.S. and other Contact group members was that now that the war is over sanctions were no longer necessary. I disagreed. I thought that sanctions were needed even now - as a main impetus for peaceful regime change. I wrote a memo arguing that targeted sanctions were critical to our accomplishing democratic change in Serbia. Secretary Albright agreed with my position and directed that we continue our sanctions work.



By that time most of Europe had dropped blanket sanctions on Serbia. The situation in Iraq at that time had already led to sanctions being discredited as too blunt an instrument with too much humanitarian fallout. There was concern that we might cause considerable suffering in Serbia if we maintained too broad a sanctions package. So, if we were going to have sanctions against Yugoslavia for regime change, they would have to be very targeted or smart sanctions.

We had to develop a program that we could sell to our European friends - again we did not have a UN Security Council resolution to work with - that would assist our efforts to getting the Serbia people to dump Milosevic.

The program that was developed was a multifaceted program worked out between the U.S. and the European Union. The objective was to strengthen the Democratic Opposition in Serbia while weakening the Milosevic regime. We would target the regime and its political, military, and bureaucratic support structure as well as its political and financial supporters.

We were going to go after Sloba's money, the money that supported his regime. We included in the target circle those we could identify as providing the political, economic, financial foundations of the regime as well as those supporting the repressive structure Milosevic had created to retain power. We defined a group of about 25 major individuals and companies that were the main sources of revenue and support. Their names were placed on a black list and trade and transactions with them were prohibited. Any of their assets found in a cooperating European country would also be frozen. Their names were also reflected in a blacklist issued by the EU which prohibited trade with them. These measures had a strong impact on Sloba and his financial support. It was beginning to cost more than it was worth to be a friend of Sloba.

Q: Talk about the Europeans. The French and the Germans and the Russians often have varying interests. How much were you able to... Were there some elements of these ones that I mentioned or others that had to be dragged kicking and screaming?

COMRAS: There was a consensus among the critical group - the French, the Germans, the British, and the Americans - on how to move toward regime change. However, there were some differences over where to place the greatest emphasis. Some supported a greater effort on working with the democratic opposition. They were somewhat more reticent when it came to tightening sanctions measures against the regime, or withholding assistance for infrastructure projects - for example the reconstruction of bridges over the Danube. But all in all there was agreement on a common approach that contained both aspects - assistance for the democratic opposition and sanctions against the regime. There were a number of times when we had to get Madeline Albright to intercede at the highest levels to keep the program together, particularly on the sanctions side. It was easier on the democratic opposition assistance side.



The key to retaining broad European Union support for the sanctions against Milosevic was to target them carefully. Exceptions also had to be made to take humanitarian considerations into account. These exceptions involved such issues as providing limited oil to individual towns through carefully managed assistance programs. We tried to give credit to democratic opposition groups so as to increase their influence and credibility.

One of the biggest, and most controversial issues was whether or not to assist Serbia in rebuilding Danube bridges. This was the greatest test of our "no assistance" policy. My instructions were to try and hold back a number of European governments who were more willing to assist the Serbs in rebuilding the Danube bridges. I also had to deal with complaints from the Bulgarians, Romanians and Hungarians that the bridge damage was disrupting so much commerce on the Danube that it had created serious economic problems for them. There was also growing concern that obstructions in the river could cause ecological damage to the river and might hold back the winter ice flow which could result in serious winter flooding. Nonetheless, because of the strong determination of President Clinton and Secretary Albright to the "no assistance" policy, we were able to hold back providing assistance to Serbia for the bridges. I have to say Serbia was their own worst enemy in this regard. They tried to blackmail the other European countries using the Danube by closing the river through Serbia to international traffic.

The Russians played no major role in implementing or blocking the sanctions. Nor did they contribute support to the democratic opposition.

Q: Were they opposed?

COMRAS: They remained pretty much on the sidelines during this period. I guess that was the best we could hope for. However, private Russian individuals and companies did seek to take some advantage from the sanctions through black market and gray market dealings.

There were a lot of other issues of direct concern to the Russians regarding the status of Kosovo, and what was going on in Bosnia. They weren't opposed to regime change in Belgrade but they were not going to be active participants in taking on Milosevic. Q: As you were doing this, did you see a change in the Kosovars, the Albanian side? Were they coalescing more?

COMRAS: Initially Rogovo was completely discredited. During the war he had become a political hostage of Milosevic. Milosevic held him in "protective custody" in Belgrade. They got him to go on television to call for an end to the NATO bombing. At the time the UCK tried to brand him as a "traitor."

On the other hand, we also had to deal with some of the radical Albanian leaders with whom we were not comfortable. This included some leaders of the UCK.



After the end of the war the UN, the EU and the United States all worked to develop the growth of pluralistic democratic parties in Kosovo. That effort has had some success. Let's hope it holds.

We're going to be in Kosovo for a long time. There are still a number of intractable issues. But hopefully time and Europe will help begin to heal things.

I've always believed, and I think this view is shared by many others, that there could be no resolution of the status of Kosovo, and no lasting political stability in Bosnia so long as Milosevic was in power in Belgrade. But, in the post-Milosevic era, the stakes are very different. Serbia is less threatening. It is moving slowly toward democracy, a free market economy, and participation in Europe institutions. Within that context, the stakes for Kosovo are moderated. In this context some kind of loose association with Serbia remains possible. This would especially be true if Serbia, Kosovo, and the other former Yugoslav countries all continue their quest for full membership in the European institutions.

Autonomy was impossible for the Albanians to accept in the Serbia of Milosevic but it's not so dramatic a solution in a democratic Serbia that is really part of Europe. I am concerned that a fully independent Kosovo, under present circumstances, could undermine the stability of the region. Kosovo would not be viable economically. Its independence would create serious economic and political problems for its neighbors also. Besides its relations with Serbia, one must consider the impact on Macedonia and its large Albanian minority which might wish to break away from Skopje and join with Kosovo. Then there is the question of relations with Albania proper. This destabilizing effect could reach into northern Greece where there is also a sizable Albanian minority.

I expect that, in time, we will see the establishment of growing economic and political ties between all of Yugoslavia's former provinces and republics. They could all benefit from such closer ties. Such ties would clearly be to their economic, political, and cultural advantage especially given the strong family ties, intermarriage and dependent economies that already exist. It makes sense now that they have gotten rid of the one great nationalistic dictatorial regime that so threatened the other Yugoslavs.



You know, it's something of a miracle that Macedonia survived the Kosovo war and its aftermath. Milosevic had warned a number of times that if NATO forces bombed Serbia or Serbian troops in Kosovo, the Serbian army would kick out all the Albanians from Kosovo. They said it. And they did it. Right at the beginning of the Kosovo air war, Serbian troops and local Serbian militias went into the Albanian towns and villages and did all they could to force the local inhabitants to flee southward into Macedonia. Milosevic's tactic was quite clear. He wanted to push the Kosovo Albanians into Macedonia to completely destabilize Macedonia and broaden and internationalize the conflict. This, he believed would lead to an international conference where a settlement would have to be imposed on all of the parties including the Macedonians, the Albanians, and the Serbs.

According to Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov, Milosevic had long planned, that, in the event of a Kosovo war, he would seek to destabilize Macedonia. His plan would be to push the Albanians south. Divide Kosovo with Albania, cede the western part of Macedonia (and its Albanian majority) to Albania and take the remaining part of Macedonia back into Serbia proper. This seemed to be what Milosevic intended. His first response to the NATO bombing was to force the exodus of Albanians southward.

It was miraculous that Macedonia didn't come apart. One of the reasons they were able to withstand this onslaught was that they were already at least semi prepared to handle it. There were British and U.S. troops already in Macedonia at that time. Both governments made a commitment to the Macedonian government that they would share the burden of the Albanian refugees and not allow it to fall alone on Macedonia. Handling the flow of Albanians across the Macedonian border became an international effort and played against Milosevic. Milosevic thought that the Macedonia would either be overrun, or seek to forcefully stop the refugees from entering. He believed that either scenario would cause an uprising among the Albanians in Macedonia.

The Albanians coming across the border were held in NATO run refugee camps close to the border. There was a commitment to return most of them to Kosovo as soon as the fighting there ended. Others might be provided refugee status elsewhere. These commitments considerably lessened the pressure on the Macedonian government and assuaged the concerns of both segments of Macedonia's population.

The United States and other NATO countries provided the funds, the camps, and the logistics to handle the refugees. Ironically, the only really negative effect that this had was a perverse one. A lot of the Macedonians were upset that the Albanians were getting so much international support. Many of them felt that they did not receive their share of assistance or consideration from the troops stationed there.



The influx of Albanians into Macedonia and the continuing instability of Kosovo after the war did create or exacerbate a number of problems for Macedonia. It certainly increased tension between the Macedonian Slavic and Albanian communities. Some of these problems were allowed to fester during the period after the Kosovo war. A group of disgruntled cross border Albanians sought to take up the work of the UCK in Macedonia. They formed their own National Liberation Army (NLA) and began to infiltrate into the mountains above the town of Tetovo. They hoped to attract strong Albanian popular support for their movement. This had all the appearances of setting of a new round of Balkan interethnic fighting.

But the NLA never really found the popular base they would need for such a conflict. They never received the same grass-root support that existed for the UCK in Kosovo.

The NLA uprising did, however, force the Macedonian government to come to terms with some of the legitimate Albanian demands. With some negotiating help from the United States and the European Union the Macedonian government made some necessary concessions in the Macedonian constitution that recognized certain rights of the Albanians that should have been there in the first place.

Both sides faced the precipice of inter-ethnic war and both sides realized that was not the course either community in Macedonia should follow. I hope that the country came of this threatening episode stronger and more coherent than before.

Q: What was your observation of the role of Greece?

COMRAS: Greece was a real problem for Macedonia under Papandreou, who was an opponent of Macedonia in almost every respect. The relationship between Gligorov and Papandreou was bitter and distrustful. There did not seem to be any way to resolve the issues between the two countries as long as these two leaders continued to face each other off. When Papandreou left the scene, the situation began to change. The new Greek Prime Minister Constantine Simitis, was a very different kind of leader. He recognized that the issues between the country were more nationalistic-based than real. The tension between the two countries served no interest for either country. He recognized that Macedonia could never really pose a significant strategic threat to Greece or to Greek interests. He understood that there was no reality to the threat of Aegean Macedonians trying to reclaim territory in northern Greece. He understood that the real risk to Greece was instability in Macedonia. Greece, he said, had a real stake in a stable Macedonia.



The Simitis government could not change its relations with Macedonia overnight. Given the context of Greek politics, it could only move slowly and cautiously in this direction. The first phase was to reduce the rhetoric between the countries, and to implement the accord worked out by Vance, Nimitz and Okun. The next phase was to free up impediments to trade and investment. Greece soon became the largest outside investor in Macedonia. More and more Greece worked to become a "big brother" of Macedonia, inextricably tying Macedonia into a relationship with Greece that would be positive for both countries. This is what's happened. The nationalistic issues, of which there are still many, receded in importance. They lost their front page impact for both countries.

Q: Let's talk about Holocaust assets. What was the situation that you dealt with?

COMRAS: Let me step back a minute and pick up my career story. I left Skopje in the summer of 1996 and went to the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs as a Diplomat-in-residence. I was given this opportunity as the Department really didn't know what else to do with me at the time. I had hoped for an onward assignment as chief of mission elsewhere, but I had become a little too controversial for that to happen at that time.

I had a great year at the University of Pittsburgh. It gave me a valuable opportunity to think, teach and write. And I did all three. I taught courses on U.S. diplomacy and Foreign Policy and ran an advanced seminar on the use of Economic Sanctions. When the year was up I still did not have any on-ward assignment. Instead I was asked to help out in the Bureau of Public Affairs. I was given a temporary position to write a paper on helping the Department of State improve its national outreach. How could we create a more positive foreign policy constituency within the United States? It seemed to me that we had a major task ahead of us in that area. Over the last two decades - and really since the Vietnam War - we had burned most of our bridges to America's non-government foreign policy institutions. This includes think tanks, universities, and the foreign policy press. We had defined our relation with these institutions in an "us and them" mode, rather than a more positive cooperative foreign policy relationship.



In previous times, the State Department had enough money in the budget to carry out a number of joint programs with Universities and outside foreign policy pundits and institutions. It had commissioned studies, held joint meetings, established advisory boards and otherwise involved these institutions in the foreign policy making process. Over time, the money for these kinds of activities dried up. There were much fewer of them. Also, the State Department began to classify many more of its documents - even on mundane issues that could have no real impact on our national security. The State Department more and more became an institution unto itself and separated itself from the non government the foreign affairs community. We began to consider the others as outsiders and even to resent their intrusions. As they were increasingly cut-off from our daily work we took it that they didn't have sufficient information to make any useful contributions. They, in turn, began to feel more and more alienated by us. This is part of the analysis I wrote it up. We needed to do something to restore a cooperative and collegial approach to foreign policy consideration. There were a number of things that we could do to improve this situation.

One of the best remaining programs we had going with the universities was the diplomat in residence program. This program put State Department people on the faculties of key universities. It was one of the few direct links we retained with these schools. I recommended that we expand this program further. It needed to be more than just a holding pattern for people like me - senior officers the department didn't know what else to do with. We needed to make it a stronger part of our foreign policy outreach.

We also need to do many other things to better engage the foreign policy community in our deliberations. We should work to foster a stronger national debate on foreign policy - a debate in which the State Department can participate in directly. We cannot simply draw up walls around our building and pretend that foreign policy is our exclusive bailiwick. Too often it appears to the public that we develop foreign policy in secret, and in private and then thrust it upon the community and then tell them to go to hell if they disagree. That appears to be the situation today.

Years ago when a Foreign Service officer came back to the State Department, he was invited by the Public Affairs Bureau to go out to give talks. In fact, they even gave some a hitch and trailer to go around the country on speaking tours. They go all over the country to speak on campuses, on the radio and before foreign policy groups.

The Department really doesn't encourage its officers to do such talking any more. There is a fear that somehow we will say the wrong thing and deviate from the State Department line. God forbid that any Foreign Service officer or member of the State Department deviated from what State Department positions. I guess we want to convince the public that there is only one right answer and that we have that right answer, and that we arrived at that answer without much discussion and debate. The public must be lead to believe, I guess, that every Foreign Service thinks exactly like every other Foreign Service officer and there is no debate.



I don't think foreign policy or the Department of State is so fragile. We ought to stimulate debate not avoid it. We ought be able to answer critics with dialogue rather than diatribe.

We ought to make the most that we can of the Open Forum. I'm proud to see what's happening in the Open Forum. We ought to stimulate and invite American Foreign Service officers to reach out to their own universities, to their own other institutions to write, to publish, to editorialize. But instead of doing that, the Department has created one new impediment after another in the way of such outreach. They have made it extremely difficult for a Foreign Service Officer to speak publicly or to write. By the time I retired from the State Department in 2001 it had become near impossible for a Foreign Service officer to write an article on foreign policy and get it published. In past years one had to get Department clearance prior to publication. This usually involved a review to ensure that the article didn't contain classified information, or otherwise misconstrue or mis-portray U.S. foreign policy. The clearance process was handled by an office the Bureau of Public Affairs. A Public Affairs Officer reviewed the article and solicited the views of interested offices. He communicated directly with the author. He would make suggestions for changes or amendments to the article. Rarely was an article turned down for substance.

Today, the process is much more cumbersome. If a Foreign Service Officer wants to publish an article he has to take himself directly to each interested office and get their approval. Once he has gathered all the necessary approvals he submits it to Public Affairs who undertakes its own de novo review of the material. I want to know what Foreign Service officer has the time, inclination, ability on his own to negotiate his article with each interested bureau or office. And besides, the process takes so long and is so cumbersome, the article is likely to be outdated before it can be cleared.

Q: They've basically shut down the ability of people to...

COMRAS: Yes, They have cut the Department and its officers off from possible outreach. And they do so, they say, to ensure that we all speak with a uniform voice. We're a democracy and I think it's important that we talk with a unified voice when it comes to explaining or interpreting existing policy. But this should not apply to personal, not government views, nor should it interfere with legitimate public discussion and debate concerning our policies. I do not think it does any real harm to the State Department that the public knows that we have internal differences and debate in the process of formulating policy. Why shouldn't there be known differences within the State Department just as there are differences between the State Department and the Defense Department, for example.

Q: It shows an attempt of control and insecurity.



We're going to stop at this point. We'll pick this up the next time.

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Today is May 13, 2003. You were saying you were dealing with the Holocaust assets.

COMRAS: My tour of duty with the Bureau of Public Affairs lasted for only a relatively short period of time. I produced a memorandum proposing measures to enhance our outreach program. I also prepared a memorandum concerning public handling of major current foreign policy themes. My position there was a temporary position.

In the meantime Stuart Eizenstat had been brought over from the Commerce Department to serve as the State Department Undersecretary for Economic Affairs. Stu brought with him a unique portfolio of issues that he had been handling since serving as our Ambassador to the European Union in Brussels. This portfolio involved special issues that President Clinton had authorized Stu Eizenstat to pursue - these were the issues related to the disposition of World War II assets seized by the Nazis including the so called "Holocaust assets" as well as assets confiscated by the Communist governments in Eastern Europe.

There was a confluence of timing and events in the mid-1990s which gave rise to new inquiry into the disposition of assets that had been expropriated by the Nazi regime and subsequently by the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. This included the assets of millions of Holocaust victims. There were multiple aspects to this issue including what became known as Nazi gold - the gold stolen by the Nazis from national treasuries or melted down gold stolen from Holocaust victims, Stolen Art, Stolen money and assets, unaccounted for accounts of Holocaust victims in Swiss and other banks, and unpaid insurance policies. These were just a few of the questions that were being asked concerning what could be considered the greatest series of thefts in history.

New information concerning these events had come to light following the release of archives dating back to the war and post war period. Also the end of Communism in Eastern Europe also provided new ground for inquiry regarding these issues.

A new generation of Americans, perhaps bolder than their parents, began to ask hard questions concerning the disposition of these assets and what countries had done, or were doing, to return them to their rightful owners. There was also a new imperative as the Holocaust survivor generation was beginning to disappear. Also there were a large number of survivors in Eastern Europe that had never received compensation after the war unlike some Holocaust victims in the West. Germany belatedly, after the war, reached several agreements on compensation. But none of this had been made available to the victims in Eastern Europe. Many of the surviving victims were very elderly and in great need of some assistance.



New questions arose also concerning the return of communal property to Jewish and other victim communities in Eastern Europe. The religious and communal properties in Eastern Europe that had been seized by the Nazis during the war were subsequently taken over by the new Communist regimes. Now that the communist regimes were no more and these countries were trying to move towards the West and to join Western European institutions, there was an increasing willingness on the part of the new democratic governments to come to terms with this past.

The issue of communal property restitution was particularly important in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria and the countries of the former Soviet Union. These countries had had very significant Jewish communities before the war. And the amount of Jewish communal property taken was enormous. How was this property to be restituted? There were also the private claims of individuals who had been able to reclaim property in the West in that period after the war but were unable to do so in the communist world until the issue of restitution generally came up in the post-communist period. There was a large constituency in the United States that had an interest in how these issues would be resolved. They began to insist also that these issues be resolved.

Stuart Eizenstat came into the government. President Clinton listened to what Stu had to say, and decided that the U.S. would play such a role. He appointed Stu as his special envoy to deal with these questions. Stu took this responsibility on in addition to his work as our Ambassador to the European Union in Brussels. He retained the portfolio when he was reassigned as Under Secretary of Commerce in Washington. And he brought it with him when to the State Department when he became the Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs.

By the time he came State, he was so busy with so many other issues that he began to need additional help to handle these restitution issues. At his behest a special office was created in the Bureau of European Affairs to provide him with the needed assistance. I was asked to head this office as the State Department's Senior Coordinator for Holocaust World War II related assets. My job was to act as the official U.S. representative on these issues under the auspices and direction of Stu Eizenstat who retained the role of Special U.S. Envoy.

I began the office with a very small staff. Our first task was to understand the nature and dimensions of these issues. Stu had given a very high priority to the question of communal property belonging to synagogues, religious schools, cemeteries, etc. We began to look at how these properties might be restituted after being held by others for more than 40 years.



We began our task by picking work that Stu had already begun with regard to Poland and the Czech Republic. Poland had been the home of the largest Jewish community in Eastern Europe and had the longest list of confiscated communal property. However, the Jewish community in Poland was now very small and unable to manage these properties on its own. This issue was complicated further by the significant number of Polish origin Jews now living outside Poland who continued to have a stake in this process.

With regard to the Czech Republic, Prague had had one of the oldest and largest Jewish communities before the war. Much of this property had been kept in tact by the Nazis who intended to use it as a Museum concerning the people they were aiming to destroy. This property survived the war and had been taken over by the Communist regime. It had great historic, cultural and financial value. We worked with international Jewish groups, with the Czech government, and with the Prague City government to ensure that this property was returned appropriately to the renaissant Prague Jewish Community.

One of the greatest complexities in dealing with these issues was the question of who should become the inheritors of this restituted property. The War and the Holocaust had dramatically reduced the Jewish Community in Europe and had led to further millions of Jews being displaced. Time had also taken its toll on this community. In Poland, for example, there were some 2-3 million Jews there before the war. The remnant community in Poland today is somewhere around 5000 to 15,000. The number of Polish Jews living outside of Poland is many fold higher than those still living in Poland. This is why many international Jewish organizations have taken a strong interest in these issues. In fact, the World Jewish Congress was the leader in drawing attention to these restitution issues.

The World Jewish Congress believed that it should be, if not the sole party of interest, at the major partner in dealing with these restitution questions. They believed they had a special role to play to take charge of this property in the name of the World Jewish Community and the numerous victims of the Holocaust who had no living heirs. This led to some competing interests and tensions between the World Jewish Congress and the local Polish Jewish Community. There were arguments to be made on both sides. The remnant community certainly had a direct interest and role to play when it came to determining which properties should be restituted and how they should be used. But the World Jewish Congress also merited a major role. Besides, the World Jewish Congress had the financial means, which the local community lacked, to pursue these issues and to maintain and run the restituted property. The question of financial means was particularly important with regard to the restitution and maintenance of Jewish cemeteries which were not income producing property, but rather, often weighed heavily as a financial burden.

There were also issues related to private claims - ownership of specific property. That was also an important part of our work. This involved real property, bank accounts, art and insurance.



The catch phrase for these assets became "Nazi Gold." This was due, in part to the publication of a book on that topic. It, in turn was based on the release of new documents dating from the war and post war period concerning the German seizure of gold and efforts made after the war to restitute what was stolen. As I said earlier, this was gold that had been taken from a number of governments as well as from a number of individuals. It involved monetary gold as well as gold extracted from glasses, from teeth, jewelry, things of this sort, and smelted down and put into bars to serve as monetary gold.

A story unfolded about the Nazi gold and what happened to it. Much of this gold was held in Switzerland or transferred through Switzerland to cover German transactions. Switzerland had been warned during the war that it would be held responsible for any of the Gold deposited or cleared through Switzerland. But Switzerland was steadfast in denying claims concerning this gold. In the course of negotiations during the 1950 Switzerland finally negotiated a settlement involving pennies on the dollar. Looking back at that settlement, and the negotiations, many modern writers concluded that the Swiss had duped the international community. There was also great concern about the status of bank accounts opened by persons who subsequently died in the Holocaust. Few of these accounts were ever paid to their heirs, and in many cases there were no heirs. The Swiss Banks hid behind bank secrecy laws and numerous procedural requirements to stop persons from claiming these accounts after the war.

Q: Secret bank accounts.

COMRAS: In addition to questions involving the status of the accounts held by Holocaust victims, there were also questions regarding the disposition of secret bank accounts in Switzerland held by the Nazis. There were also questions about the contents of safe deposit boxes. Many Jewish families took safety deposit boxes in Switzerland to provide some refuge for their assets to protect them against loss or seizure by the Nazis. They would place their money and/or other valuable assets in Swiss Banks for protection. A great many of these persons did not survive the war. It remains a mystery as to what happened to the contents of many of these safe deposit boxes. And in the case of the bank accounts themselves, most heirs did not have the documentation required by the banks to inquire concerning such accounts. And in some cases, the banks simply just hid the money or refused to pay. There was no paper trail in the sense of being able to show a death certificate or other documents that the banks began to require. The banks rebuffed attempts by relatives to determine whether or not their family held accounts in their bank.



Unlike most banking systems which are required to turn over to the government the funds in long term inactive accounts, the Swiss banks can hold onto these funds indefinitely. That means they had no real interest in determining the rightful owners or having the money transferred to heirs. The bank continues to charge fees, it continues to use the money, it has the investments, and various other things. The money is at the disposition of the bank. So the banks in these cases did not have any incentive to be forthcoming. Rather they imposed very strict rules concerning account documentation, death certificates, wills and probate. They made it virtually impossible for rightful heirs to gain access to these funds.

The more one learned concerning these practices, the bigger the scandal became. One night a Swiss Bank Security Guard noticed that the bank in which he was working had begun to shed a large stack of old files. That had never happened before. He took an interest and saw they were shedding papers related to old accounts from the war - and it appeared that many of the listed account holders had Jewish names. He decided to grab a stack of these files and turned them over to a Local Jewish Community Group. This really broke the scandal wide open.

One question led to another and soon the Swiss banks were facing major lawsuits in U.S. courts. Several State governments also began to place pressure on Swiss banks doing business in their jurisdiction to come clean. This included New York and California.

Q: What were you doing?

COMRAS: I guess we became the point office in the U.S. government covering this issue. We worked closely with others in the Justice Department and Treasury Department. But Stuart Eizenstat was the principal in the U.S. government charged with dealing with these issues.

Many of the questions began to have an impact on our relations with Switzerland and other countries. These were very sensitive and emotional issues. They involved substantial sums of money, and touched on a number of moral and historic questions. The larger issue was not money, but moral and actual culpability. This was the time to come clean for the historic record and to work for some closure on this extremely painful chapter of 20th century history.

The more the United States got into the issue the more it was a morass, the more we were drawn in even further. More and more American states began to apply their own pressure and more and more groups became involved. There was an ever increasing demand that the U.S. government get involved.

Our office began to assist other offices in the State Department in focusing attention on the issues related to our bilateral relations and to trying to promote justice with regard to these issues. We supported the State Department efforts to talk with the concerned countries and to work toward a resolution.



At the same time Stu Eizenstat was spearheading a major international effort to investigate archives world wide, and to establish an accurate historic record concerning Nazi gold and all of these other related issues. This work culminated in a historic report prepared by the Historian's Office. It also led to a major international conference on the Nazi gold. Working with Stu our office also helped to get the different legal parties to begin to negotiate on a possible settlement of the claims against the Swiss banks. This effort was eventually successful and led to a major, multi-billion dollar settlement to benefit individual claimants as well as the Eastern European Jewish Community and other victim's organizations. The funds were also to be used to prevent future genocide.

I was directly engaged in most of these issues. The main task Stu assigned to me, however, was communal property restitution. I traveled widely through Eastern Europe to speak with government officials and non governmental organizations about these issues. I am proud of the success I had in moving these issues forward.

I also take particular pride in the role I played in bringing parties on both sides of the Swiss Banking issues to the table. I helped create a cooperative council among the plaintiff attorneys so that they could begin a settlement process with the Banks. I also arranged for the first cross-the-table talks between the two sides.

We also had numerous shuttle diplomacy style discussions which were handled by Stuart with my help as well as the help of our lawyers. It was a long and drawn out process. For me this took up most of a year between the fall of 1997 and the summer of 1998.

Q: By the time you arrived on the scene, had the Swiss government and their bankers come to the conclusion they really had to do something about this?

COMRAS: They were still quite ambivalent. This was a growing issue and just becoming a crisis issue. At first the Swiss government tried to stay clear of it. They insisted this was an issue which involved the banks, not the Swiss government. They later became drawn in as the issue broadened into an international reexamination of the roles played by governments with regard to assets stolen during the war, as well as their involvement or indifference with regard to the holocaust. The government came to realize under great pressure, that it had to become involved in the Swiss bank issues. The banks also recognized that this was not an issue that was going to be taken lightly and would blow away.



The Swiss government belatedly agreed to set a special commission to look at the claims being made against the Swiss banks. This commission was chaired by the ex-Federal Bank Chairman Paul Volker. It was named the Volker Commission. Volker was charged with investigating claims and reviewing bank practices regarding accounts that dated back to the war. This involved the banks making their own audit of these accounts to determine their origin and nature. It was a very slow process. However, it also demonstrated to the banks that they needed to make a settlement here. A fair settlement was the only way to deal with the complex legal questions, issues and claims.

As I said before, the Holocaust asset issues spread wide into a number of different matters. There were also issues related to real property, art, and insurance claims. Art restitution still remains a major question as do the insurance claims.

At the time of the war, the Nazi government required the insurance companies to pay a small amount of money to them for every Holocaust victim. It blows your mind when you think about it. The Holocaust victims and their heirs tried to make claims against a number of these insurance companies and were never able to get any recognition for any of their claims in the postwar years from any of the insurance companies. I played an important role in focusing Stu's attention to this difficult matter. We were able to convince the insurance companies to follow the path set by the Swiss banks and to begin to negotiate a global settlement.

Q: How did you find the reaction of the European Bureau and others? Were you a pain in the neck?

COMRAS: To them I was a pain in the ass. That came with the territory and the issues that I helped keep on the table. A great many of my colleagues in the State Department just wanted these issues to disappear. I guess they just wanted me to disappear also. I was making their life, and management of bilateral issues difficult. My role was to look after the U.S. government interest which I interpreted as the interest of the U.S. constituents most affected by these matters. My colleagues believed their responsibility was to stop these issues from complicating our overall relations with the countries concerned. The State Department received numerous complaints from foreign embassies concerning our work. The Swiss were upset regarding our support for inquiries into Swiss actions during and after the war and with regard to Swiss banking practices. The Austrian Government was concerned about new questions we put on the table concerning the World War II theft of Art. No country was really happy with our message concerning their need to grapple with communal and private real property restitution. No, we were a very unpopular lot.



Let me cite one example - the case of Poland and the Czech Republic. Both countries were moving toward eventual EU membership as part of the process of EU membership new members must take on the previously established rules, practices and procedures already affecting all current EU countries. This is referred to as "The Acquis." This included restitution of property seized during the Second World War. This matter was both sensitive and complex for countries which fell under communist rule at the end of the war. They did not participate in the restitution process that was begun after the war in Western Europe. Every time I referred to this problem my wrist was slapped. I was an activist. The State Department generally doesn't like to be activist in these kinds of areas. I may have gotten a little bit ahead of the Department on some of these issues. I don't think I ever got ahead of Stu. It was easier for my colleagues to slap my wrists and hold me accountable than it was for them to take oStu. So I became the whipping boy on these issues. I could take that for about a year. But, the issues were going so fast and so many other people were beginning to get involved that it became clear to me that it was time to move on. My office was split between two new groups. Ambassador Henry Clarke continued to lead the effort on communal property restitution while J.D. Bindenagel came on board to handle all the other claim issues. I accepted a new post as the Director of the Office of Canadian Affairs.

Q: You did that from when to when?

COMRAS: I did the Holocaust assets from the summer of '97 until the spring of '98.

Q: And then you moved to Canadian Affairs.

COMRAS: Then I moved to be director of the Office of Canadian Affairs.

Q: From when to when?

COMRAS: From the spring of '98 until I joined the group dealing with the Yugoslav Kosovo war in late '98.

Q: Let's talk about Canadian Affairs. Our relationship with Canada is always a very touchy one. The Canadians always think we don't pay enough attention to them. Secretaries of State don't lie awake at night and worry about Canada. What was the status of American-Canadian relations?



COMRAS: That's a very interesting issue. American Canadian issues touches on just about every aspect of possible relationships between two countries. It is the most extensive, complex relationship we have with any country. But it's a very natural relationship, a very direct relationship. We sometimes have great difficulties telling us apart. We live in so similar a culture and environment that sometimes the regional differences in Canada and in the United States are more distinguishable than the differences between many Canadians and Americans. We also live in the same time zones, speak, for the most part, the same language. We use the same telephone systems. We move relatively freely across our common border. A great many Canadians have come to call the United States there home. The same is true for Americans in Canada. There is also a considerable amount of inter-marriage. We experience so many of the same things in our daily lives - whether it is fast food restaurants, chain department stores and strip malls or gas stations. It's an easy, broad relationship. That is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the job with respect to the Department of State.

The usual role of the Department of State is to serve as the focal point for bilateral relations between the United States and other countries. That's not the case when it comes to Canada. There's no way that the Department of State can, or even should, play that role. It's just that so much of our relationship with Canada is direct and intertwined from government agencies to government agencies and from companies to companies. Our business communities, our economies, our cultures, are just too intertwined.

Hardly anyone needs to work through the Department of State, or to even seek our assistance. That means that the State Department, and our embassy in Ottawa have a challenging time identifying what their role should be. The embassy in Ottawa is simply not going to play the same role that our other embassies around the world play.

Nevertheless, the State Department and the Embassy in Ottawa do become engaged in numerous issues between our countries. The Canadian embassy in Washington perhaps plays the largest institutional role in our government to government relationships. That's probably because we loom so important to Canada - much more so than Canada looms for us.

A lot of our work was with the Canadian embassy and back topping our embassy in Ottawa. The kinds of issues that we dealt with were specific problems best left to the Foreign Offices to resolve. Among the most important issues we led on were issues related to our shared border and its great lakes, rivers and other shared waterways and resources.

The most important issues we dealt with were resource issues. We also handled the more traditional diplomatic and national defense issues. Canada is an ally and member of NATO and other Atlantic Community institutions. We work together on so many common foreign policy objectives.



Of course, we also had to manage a number of foreign policy issues where there were strong differences between the United States and Canada. Our different ways in dealing with Cuba is a prime example.

Q: I have the feeling that in a way the Canadians enjoyed having this point of dispute with the United States, like showing "We are a sovereign power" with Cuba, which in many ways didn't cost them a thing. They could always go back to their people and say, "See, we're beating the United States up on Cuba." If you're Canadian, you're trying to prove that you're not American.

COMRAS: That's right. There was a certain desire on the part of many Canadians to try and demonstrate that they were not Americans. They would stress their general liberal socialist traditions, or their being more "European" than the United States. It's true that if you look at the political spectrum in Canada and compare it to the political spectrum in the United States, some differences can be discerned. Our conservative groups are somewhat more pronounced. There middle of the road is somewhat to the left of ours.

Our governments operate in very different fashion. Theirs is a parliamentary democracy, ours a three branch democracy.

United States policy is usually more pragmatic and more influenced by current events and the local constituency interests. Canadian interests vis a vis Cuba were different than ours. They didn't have a strong Cuban-American population and Lobby. Canada is much further from Cuba than Florida. The history of their relationship with the Castro regime is very different than ours. It entails fewer costs or security concerns. Cuba is a wonderful issue for the Canadians to use to differential themselves from us on Foreign Policy. And they new how to irritate us when they wanted to by playing up these differences.

I have to say that the Helms Burton Legislation was a great irritant to Canada. It frightened them considerably. Especially the notion that we might place economic sanctions or penalties on some of their companies. This legislation gave rise to a number of bilateral issues that had to be closely managed.

One of the most significant events that took place during my tenure in that office was the decision to move the Office of Canadian Affairs out of thBureau of European and Canadian Affairs and into a new Bureau of Western Hemispheric Affairs, WHA.

Q: How did that go? I can see the Canadians to a certain extent not being particularly happy being with a bunch of these Latinos down south.



COMRAS: I have to say that it was the Canadians themselves that stirred up the idea of moving the Office of Canadian Affairs into a closer relationship with the offices dealing with Latin American Countries. This idea reportedly had its geneses in a dinner conversation between Canadian Foreign Minister Axworthy and Secretary Albright. They agreed that there should be greater focus on shared interests in dealing with Latin America, and in economic development and trade relations within the hemisphere. This should include also educational, cultural and environmental matters.

The Canadians were the first to take these steps. They set up a new Bureau of American Affairs that included the offices dealing with the United States and all of Latin America. However, it must be noted that in the Bureau of American Affairs, greatest importance of the first order was given to the office dealing with the United States. It was to that office that the other offices were joined to constitute the new bureau. U.S. affairs took up the greatest part of the resources of this new bureau. It looked great on paper, but really changed nothing in how the Canadians dealt with the U.S. or with the rest of the hemisphere.

That's not what happened in Washington. And the results were quite different for our relations with Canada. Canada had hoped that the move might increase the importance shown by the State Department with regard to relations with Canada. They believed the move would give that relationship a higher profile in the State Department. They felt that Canada was not getting all the attention it needed from the Bureau that spent most of its time dealing with other European countries and issues. But, they did not get what they expected from this move.

While the Canadians had moved all of Latin America to join their U.S. office. The U.S. did the opposite. It joined the Canadian office with the rest of Latin America. The main focus of the new WHA bureau remained Latin America to which Canada was now appendage. Our office dealing with Canada certainly was not becoming the main focus of this new bureau. And what's more, the Canadian lost the involvement of an Assistant Secretary of State and his staff that had dealt regularly with Canada. That was replaced by an Assistant Secretary and Staff that knew nothing about Canada other than it had differences with the U.S. when it came to Cuba. Canada would not dominate this new bureau.

While the European bureau had learned over the years to treat Western Europe and Canada gingerly and just about as equals, the environment was very different in the new bureau which had had a history of being more condescending in its relationships with the countries to the south. Canada was now going to get pretty much the same treatment.

The situation in Latin America, the cultures, the issues in which we were engaged, the history that we had, was significantly different than that related to our relations with Canada.



One more point. We share many more issues in common with Canada that concern our European relations and alliances, e.g. NATO, OECD, than we do with regard our common relations with Latin America. We didn't need to change bureaus to improve the way we coordinated our common policies toward Latin America. We confused that coordination with trying to assimilate Canada with the Latin American countries - a foolish quest.

In the new bureau our small office really just became an island within a different sea. It was very hard to at first try to educate our own leadership as to the importance of the issues and the distinctions of Canada from the rest of Latin America. If anything our relationship with Canada was weakened.

Q: Bureaucratically it's pretty evident.

COMRAS: I thought so. Listen, I tried to make it work. I tried to educate and interest the front office. The most they came up with was to appoint a new Deputy Assistant Secretary who was charged with a portfolio that grouped Canada with Central America. I couldn't get them to focus on the Canadian issues that needed attention. But, they didn't seem to want to leave me free to run with the ball either. I found that my own relationship with the new DAS was becoming strained. I believe this was, in part, because I was still dealing regularly with the European Bureau on many of the issues before us. What were these issues? They were issues related to the European theater, or issues totally bilateral in scope. We dealt with very few issues that were common to Latin America. I am referring to issues related to Serbia and Kosovo, to questions concerning nuclear disarmament and missile destruction, matters pertaining to NATO expansion and NATO budgets and expenditures, trade issues concerning the EU we shared with Canada, matters related to OECD and the OSCE. These were all foreign issues when it came to the WHA bureau leadership.

Q: Their embassy would almost have to hop over the boundaries and go talk to the European Bureau about NATO and stuff like that.

COMRAS: Regularly. And for that reason we also made sure that we had at least one representative from our office attend the regular European Bureau staff meetings so that we could stay up to date and involved in these European bureau related issues. Since the WHA bureau held its office director meetings at the same time as the European Bureau, and since it was de rigueur for me to attend the WHA meeting, I usually sent someone else from my office to the EUR office director meetings. I must say this often created great frustration. I feared we were becoming less able to stay on time of these important issues in our relations with Canada.



It was an interesting experiment. I don't believe that it was a successful experiment. I'm not sure what the status is now, whether Canada has been returned to some other status in the Department, but I hope that that's the case.

Q: Did you get involved in the anti-land mine issue?

COMRAS: Yes. This one of several issues we dealt with during my tenure. Another was our opposition to the UN establishing a new international criminal court along the lines supported by Canada. We did not have the central role to play on these issues. Our role was to facilitate contact and discussion. These issues were also being worked directly between the White House and the Prime Minister's office.

Q: Chretien was the prime minister at this point. How were relations between Clinton and Chretien?

COMRAS: The relationship was a very good one. I'm sure they remain good today. Our relations with Canada, for the most part, are always very good. However, there are wrinkles that develop every once in a while over such issues as Agricultural exports, Magazine advertising, wood imports and other mundane questions that have to be dealt with regularly. These are natural issues given the very intense and broad economic and trade relationship that exist between us. But each one of these irritants works its way through.

One of the issues that came up during my tenure was the question of magazine and newspaper content. The Canadians wanted to make sure that they retained their own independent media. They were worried that their media was being taken over by the United States and merely replicating American journals and press. This issue involved advertising revenues. The Canada advertising market is much smaller than the American market. American advertising was cheaper because it served a larger base. Replicating publications and articles is much cheaper than maintaining independent staffs to prepare their own articles. Canadian press has to charge more for ads to cover these expenses. So the question was, how Canada could assure the survival of its own media.. One answer was by taxing the American journals that were accepting Canada advertisements differently than the Canadian journals. Of course, we protested this and this became a major trade issue.

These kinds of issues arose on a regular basis. But, when it comes to the broader questions of our relationship, our common interests and common outlooks usually prevailed.



Q: Did you find that particularly in Ontario the rule of the intellectuals, maybe also the French Canadian intellectuals, was sort of left-wing anti-American somewhat duplicating the same thing in France?

COMRAS: No. That may have been the case earlier. But it was no longer the case in the late 1990s. The French and the English could go after each other on Canadian politics, but they weren't going after us in the same broad way. The Canadians, French and English, felt comfortable in the United States and they wanted us to feel that they were open for business and that meant attracting Americans to go there.

Q: You got called off this to go back to the love of your life, the Balkans.

COMRAS: You might say that. When the Kosovo air war began it became necessary to put in place new sanctions measures that would work in lock-step with our military action. We needed measures that would prevent the Milosevic regime from replacing the oil and equipment that we sought to destroy. I was asked to design and win acceptance for a limited sanctions program that would be applied against Serbia even in the absence of any new UN Security Council resolution.

My work during the war was directed particularly at cutting off the oil flow to Serbia and keeping Serbia from obtaining other needed replacement resources that might prolong the war. When the fighting ended, I was charged with putting in place a somewhat broader set of targeted sanctions aimed at fostering getting regime change.

We came up with a set of targeted sanctions that was directed at the Slobodan Milosevic Regime, but not at the people of Serbia. We targeted Milosevic and his cronieWe were able to identify the critical companies and individuals that ought to be blacklisted and whose bank accounts should be frozen. We gained EU-wide agreement to prohibit any dealings with these companies or individuals. These measures placed greater economic stress on the Milosevic regime which was already in great financial difficulty due to the previous round of sanctions, the Kosovo war, and the general economic downturn in the region. Slobodan lost his ability to refloat his economy. His party lost the financial capital it needed to support fealty to the regime or to finance political campaigns or buy influence. The Slobodan regime, which had been a crony regime of great profit to those who supported Milosevic, was beginning to go bankrupt. It no longer was profitable to support Milosevic. In fact, Milosevic had become a much greater financial liability than an asset. There was no money to be made anymore from being a regime supporter. Rather, the regime was seeking to draw out money from those that had supported it to bring it back, to carry out the things that it needed to do. The Milosevic regime also lacked the funds necessary to cover state or party functionary salaries. It was working at such a deficit that it was losing its ability to rule.



Milosevic decided to call for earlier elections to give him a freer hand to deal with these issues. He over-estimated his ability to garner the money and support he needed from his cronies to dominant the political process. But the combination of targeted sanctions and other pressures on the regime had seriously undercut the regime's financial underpinnings and had made the regime vulnerable to a political upset. At the same time the we had helped unite and strengthen the political opposition. The situation was ripe for an overthrow of the Milosevic regime.

Q: What was your position in this?

COMRAS: I was responsible for developing and winning compliance with the sanctions imposed on the regime. I had the job of selling this approach to our European friends and monitoring and cajoling their compliance. Working with my own small team, we had developed a list of Yugoslav companies and entities that were specifically targeted by the sanctions. We also had to pressure countries not to undercut our "no assistance" policies regarding Serbian infrastructure reconstruction. I used to say that our group constituted "the nag factor."

I also had an important role to play in explaining and justifying our policies domestically and internationally. I went on speaking tours throughout Europe. This included meeting with journalists, participating in conferences, talking with government officials and with business groups.

Q: How well were you supported in getting your information by the Economic Bureau, the CIA, other sources?

COMRAS: We received excellent support from the intelligence community and other government agencies. My team included people from the Defense Department, the Treasury Department, and CIA. We worked closely with Customs.

Q: By this point, did you feel that considering our concerns over Iraq and Iran and at various times Yugoslavia that we had a pretty well honed sanctions instrument within the government?

COMRAS: We had spent a good deal of time trying to perfect our sanctions programs. I worked on sanctions for a number of years and can tell you that we had become quite sophisticated in developing and implementing the various sanctions programs under our charge. Our experience had grown exponentially during that period of time I was involved with sanctions. This included gaining experience and learning lessons from each of the sanctions imposed during that period. The list includes Libya, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Haiti and Yugoslavia. All of this gave us tools to work with.



Q: You ended the Kosovo business when?

COMRAS: There is no specific date, but my task pretty continued until Milosevic's handover to the International Tribunal. After the downfall of Milosevic we had begin removing sanctions, but keeping appropriate pressure to ensure that Milosevic was handed over to ICTY. We had a great sense of accomplishment. And I began to think about retiring on a high note.

Just about that time I received some feelers about my interest in giving a hand to the Bureau or Near East and Asian Affairs and the International Organization Bureau concerning the failing sanctions on Iraq.

Q: We'll pick this up the next time with the Bush II administration coming in.

Before we move on, we're talking about the Clinton administration, but you were still wearing the Canadian hat, weren't you?

COMRAS: Yes, I remained the director of the Office of Canadian Affairs through 1998 and into early 1999. However, it became clear in early 1999 that I was working full time on Kosovo and needed to be replaced with regard to Canadian Affairs.

Q: You mentioned something off-mic about President Bush, Bush II, about a Canadian and a death penalty. How did this come about?

COMRAS: During my tenure as director of the Office of Canadian Affairs, I had to deal with the nasty business of a Canadian national who had been sentenced to death in Texas for murdering an 80 year old women. The crime took place in the early 1980s and had run its course of appeals. The Canadian charged was mentally retarded. It appeared that he was more an accomplice than the main actor. The other person charged with the crime was given life imprisonment.

There were also serious questions as to whether he had received an adequate defense. But, the most serious issue from our perspective was that he had never been apprized of this right to seek assistance from the Canadian Consulate. Nor had the Canadian consulate been informed of the case until its latest stages of appeal. This ran counter to our treaty obligations vis a vis Canada.



There were strong grounds to believe that his attorney at the trial that found him guilty was incompetent. He fell asleep during the trial. Despite these questions, the appellate court, though critical of the trial attorney, held that it had not really affected the outcome of the trial.

The Canadian government is officially opposed to the death penalty. And so the Canadian government began to take a great interest in this case. It became a major issue in the Canadian Press. The Canadian government made special appeals to Governor Bush to provide some clemency particularly in light of the violation of the consular agreements between the United States and Canada. They maintained that had they been notified they would have assured that he had a more adequate defense attorney.

The Canadian government put considerable pressure on the State Department to intervene in the case. Our attorneys, while sympathetic to the Canadian position, felt constrained from making any direct intervention in the matter. Rather, they wrote Governor Bush to inform him of the international requirements to contact the Canadian Consulate when a Canadian national is arrested. Governor Bush's office never responded.

Governor Bush brushed aside the numerous appeals for clemency and pro-forma referred them to the Texas clemency board. That board was known for its conservative approach and had granted clemency from death sentences in only very exceptional circumstances. They did not seem inclined to grant it here.

The case eventually made its way up to the Supreme Court of the United States. A stay was granted for several months while they looked at the issue but they could not agree there was sufficient federal constitutional grounds upon which to intercede in the case.

It was clear that once Governor Bush had made a decision, he was going to stick with it. This case left a very bad taste in every ones mouth.

Q: Where shall we pick up now?

COMRAS: We were going to talk about Iraq and the changes made to our policy in the beginning of the new Bush administration.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the United States pushed for and obtained broad international economic sanctions to try to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. These were very comprehensive sanctions and they had a major and immediate impact on Iraq. But, with the passage of time, many began to question the value of the sanctions.



Sanction critics argued that the sanctions had not succeeded in getting Saddam to leave Kuwait peacefully. Others argued that the sanctions were causing great humanitarian suffering throughout Iraq. And others maintained that the sanctions were strengthening Saddams control in Iraq.

I found these arguments specious. Even if the sanctions were not able in and of themselves to force Iraq to leave Kuwait, they served a very valuable purpose. They sapped the energy, power, and finances of Iraq during that critical period just after the invasion of Kuwait. They bought us some time to build a coalition and to deploy troops in the region. They gave the international community a way to respond immediately to the crisis and demonstrate its approbation. And they significantly impeded Saddam's ability to fortify his military and to prepare against the response of the Military coalition being raised against him.

Remember, Kuwait was invaded at the beginning of August 1990 and the Gulf war didn't begin until February, 1991. The sanctions kept Saddam from using this period to benefit from the Kuwait oil and other resources, and to otherwise prepare himself against the onslaught that was to be mounted against him. This probably saved countless military lives.

Q: As I recall it, one of the people who has contributed to this oral history program, Admiral Crowe, who was then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before Congress to let the sanctions go on it seemed to be almost indefinitely. What was your feeling? Do you think this would have gotten Iraq to withdraw?

COMRAS: That's an interesting question. Given what we know now about the character of Saddam Hussein, I don't think the sanctions alone would have resulted in his withdrawal from Kuwait. At that time, however, we believed that Saddam was more rational. We thought that increasing pressure on his regime, and his survival instincts, would convince him to withdraw without a military confrontation.

While military action became necessary to get Saddam out of Kuwait, the sanctions were also necessary for the reasons I stated above. Also, the application of sanctions, and their failure to get Saddam to leave Kuwait serves as an important prerequisite to convince Congress that there was no alternative to military action. You will recall, that there was a major national debate at that time as to whether military action should be authorized.



I don't think that anyone thought that the sanctions would work quickly. Sanctions take a long time to work their effect. It can take months or years before their real impact is felt. Many argued at the time that we should give the sanctions even more time before engaging in military action. One of those was Colin Powell, who argued that we should let the sanctions run for as long a period as possible before deploying troops. But, Powell also argued that if we were going to deploy troops, we should use overwhelming force to deal Saddam a major quick blow. He recognized that the sanctions were buying us the time we needed to put together and deploy to the field the needed overwhelming military force.

Q: When were you brought in to the Iraq...

COMRAS: I began dealing with Iraq issues during the run-up to the Gulf war. At the time I was running the Open Forum. I moved from that position into the Economic Business Bureau to serve as the Director of the Office of East West Trade. Our office also had lead responsibility in the State Department for seeking international cooperation on trade controls and sanctions. So I was directly involved in the Iraq sanctions program.

After the Gulf war ended, a determination was made to continue the sanctions and tie them to a series of benchmarks established by UN resolution. These included ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, an end to a repression of the Kurds, basic rights for Iraqis, and compensation concerning the invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War.

Over the next 2 years we worked on a complex series of sanctions measures which took into account issues related to oil exports, providing humanitarian goods to Iraq, but keeping pressure on the Saddam regime. We moved from what was almost a total set of sanctions to an adjusted sanctions program, which included plans for an oil for food program.

Our objective was to put in place effective sanctions, but to mitigate their unintended humanitarian effects concerning Iraq's general population.

It was already clear that putting pressure on the people of Iraq would not, in itself, bring down the Saddam Hussein regime. Yet we needed the sanctions to keep him Saddam boxed up and to stop him from strengthening his military regime, his repression of opposition groups, his WMD program, and his threat to his neighbors.



Q: He was supposed to be doing certain things.COMRAS: That's right. Early on the idea was floated of allowing him to export set amounts of oil under a UN program that would allow him to use the oil proceeds to obtain needed civilian items for his population. An apparatus was set up to control the oil so that all of the oil would be done under this UN program and consistent with it. All the funds generated from these oil sales would be put into an international escrow account controlled by the United Nations. Under this Oil for Food program a special office would monitor the oil exports and approve contracts related to the importation of needed civilian goods. Special provision would be made to insure an equitable distribution of civilian goods throughout the country.

Money would be taken off the top of the proceeds earned by Iraq oil and put into the compensation, and used to run and pay for the Oil for Food Program, and to support the other UN activities in Iraq including the inspection for the arms and weapons of mass destruction and other prohibited items.

A special UN Sanctions Committee developed and approved a list of goods that could be imported into Iraq under this program. Other items would require going to the UN Sanctions Committee for an exception to allow them to go. The preapproved list included food, medicine, and other civilian items, but not the kind of things that you would worry allow a country to build up its military capabilities. The program was administered quite tightly in the beginning. But, with time, began to be enforced less and less. Its weaknesses demonstrated the importance of organizing the sanctions programs to include sufficient resources and capabilities to monitor, police, and implement them. Saddam Hussein was very adept at finding ways to circumvent the sanctions. Saddam quickly grasped the loopholes and shortcomings of the Oil for Food program and turned that program quickly into a big money making and influence peddling machine. He developed multiple sources of financing including the illegal export of oil. He distorted the Oil for Food Program in order to get substantial kickbacks from those given contracts to lift Iraqi oil or to supply Iraq with civilian goods. It became a very profitable system for the Iraq regime. Iraq also continued to export large quantities of oil via a new Syrian pipeline, and by truck to Turkey. This was completely illegal under the oil for food program, but nothing was done to stop these practices.

As the oil for food program developed over time, Saddam found even more ways to profit from it. By the late 1990s the program was nothing but a farce. In fact, much of the money that had accumulated in the Oil for Food account was not even being spent. Saddam had other important sources of income.

Saddam had effectively turned the oil for food program into his own graft scheme. He used it to favor groups who cooperated with him and to cut off others. He didn't care if there was a humanitarian disaster in his country. This he could blame on the sanctions.



Saddam sought to convince the world that the sanctions were responsible for killing innocent children, and the elderly and infirmed. The sanctions increasingly became unpopular in Europe and around the world. As they became more and more unpopular, they were less and less respected.

For its part, the UN was doing little or nothing to effectively monitor the sanctions. The system in place worked only pro forma and was already terribly corrupt.

By 1998 the Syrians had developed a pipeline that accessed the Kirkuk oil fields and ran to the Mediterranean through Syria. The Syrians made an arrangement with Iraq to pretend that they were importing Iraq oil to cover the shortfall in Syria. But, they were exporting this oil as fast as they could. Iraq was willing to sell the oil to Syria at a discount in order to be able to get money outside of the Oil for Food program. It became an open secret that Syria was exporting openly Iraqi oil outside of the Oil for Food Program and that that money was being brought into Iraq for its own purposes outside of the system.

Q: Within the 2 apparatus, one where you were in the State Department, the other the UN, was this pretty clear what was happening?

COMRAS: For those who were watching the issues of Iraq, these violations were very open and clear. There were a number of other items at play. Our attention was directed mostly at the question of the status of the UNMOVIC inspectors in Iraq, and with regard to maintaining safe overflights, policing the no fly zone and other military related questions. Saddam pressured the inspectors to the point of their being pulled out of Iraq. Clinton responded with Cruise missiles. But the Clinton Administration was never able to put sufficient pressure on Saddam to get the inspectors back into Iraq.

These issues were often treated on the front page of our nation's newspapers. Sanctions could only make the back pages. During this period the sanctions were falling apart. To demonstrate their unpopularity, the foreign minister of France in 1998 decided himself to openly violate the sanctions. He flew into Baghdad with a plane carrying civilian goods violating both air travel ban and the economic sanctions at the same time.

Q: It was a socialist...

COMRAS: Yes.

Q: Let's talk a bit about how we were viewing the key countries: France, Russia, and maybe to some extent Germany.



COMRAS: France, Russia and Germany were all pretty much unhappy with the sanctions regime then in place. The French and the Russians were busy developing their own new direct commercial ties with Iraq. Both were interested in Iraq oil Both wanted to upgrade Iraqi oil fields. They saw very lucrative opportunities to sell Iraq sophisticated oil field equipment and to benefit from controlling some of this Iraqi oil.

By 1997 or '98, the Oil for Food Program had opened up even wider than initially envisaged. Caps on Iraqi oil exports were removed. Saddam began to take full advantage of this program for his own interests. He took full advantage of the stupidity and negligence demonstrated by those running the program and of the failure of any country to take an interest in what was really happening with the program. The United States and Europe appeared to be interested only in questions related to WMD, military equipment and dual use items. They were arguing about the list of items that could be approved. They didn't spend much time looking at the poor way in which the program was being administered.

The Oil for Food system worked in the following manner. Iraq could sell oil to any company that had been preapproved by the Sanctions Committee to receive Iraqi oil. They could purchase civilian goods from any company provided the contract was approved by the UN's Oil for Food Office. The money generated by their oil exports was to be deposited in an escrow account at the BNP bank in New York. A percentage of these funds would go to run the program, go to the compensation fund, and fund the UN's other activities in Iraq.

At the outset, some 870 companies obtained Sanctions Committee approval authorizing them to apply to Iraq for an oil contract. Each of these companies had been presented to the sanctions committee by a UN member country. However, no real work was done to determine their bona fides. Unless the Sanctions Committee had some strong reason to oppose, the company would be put on. Most of these companies were simply front companies or middlemen or traders who had had absolutely no experience before in dealing with oil. Many of them were based in European countries and in Russia. It became a very lucrative business to obtain an Iraq oil contract. But, it was even more lucrative for Saddam and his cronies. They ran a scam that worked as follows: They would choose only companies willing to participate in their scam. They would sell him a quantity of oil but expect a payment back under the table.

The same kind of system was used with regard to Iraq's purchase of civilian goods. These contracts had to be approved by the Oil for Food Office. But there was no real mechanism to determine the validity of the price or the transactions. When civilian goods arrived in Iraq there was a document check made by a company under contract to the UN. They would certify the arrival of the goods and this would cause the Oil for Food Office to authorize payment to the exporting firm from the Oil for Food Escrow Account.



Saddam would also use his power to choose the companies Iraq would deal with to exercise influence. He even reportedly began to give away oil vouchers to those who was courting. These could be turned over at a great profit to one of the 870 companies on the UN list.

Q: Was this a matter of... How did you view the State Department apparatus as doing anything about this? Whom were you telling? Was it going anywhere?

COMRAS: I think it was very apparent during the last year of the Clinton Administration that the Iraq sanctions program was in shambles. These sanctions had been neglected for some time and it was difficult to get the attention necessary to address the problems associated with them. Other Iraq issues dominated any discussion on Iraq.

I began holding some meetings with people in IO and the NEA bureau to discuss what might be done to put new teeth behind the Iraq sanctions. We even discussed the possibility of incorporating some new elements such as career border monitors and Sanctions Assistance Missions. One idea was to place border monitors inside Jordan, Syria and Turkey to better observe what was moving across into Iraq.

These were challenging issues, but I was still pretty much decided to retire.

Shortly after the elections, President-elect George Bush indicated that Colin Powell would serve as Secretary of State. Both the President-elect and Powell indicated that they would place a very high priority on dealing appropriately with Iraq. The first time that Colin Powell talked to the press following the announcement of his pending appointment, he spelled out a new agenda to "reenergize the sanctions on Iraq." I took this to mean that the preliminary work we already had underway on improving the implementation of the Iraq sanctions would take on some real importance in the new Administration.

I started becoming more active in dealing with these issues. I wrote up several discussion papers and presented some new ideas on how to actually "reenergize" the Iraq sanctions.

The main elements of the program I suggested included a complete overhaul of the Oil for Food program. That program had to be significantly tightened and closely monitored. We had to insure that all of Iraq's oil revenues were channeled back under the program. And we had to impose new rules for oil lifting contracts and the sale of civilian items. Monitoring and enforcement should become a major element in the new program.

We had to stop the Syrian pipeline or if we couldn't stop the Syrian pipeline, which was more likely to be the situation, we had to bring the Syrian pipeline oil under an escrow account that required Saddam to seek approval for fund expenditures.



We might, for example, develop local escrow accounts that would be monitored by the UN but administered by the neighboring countries: Turkey, Syria, Jordan. I won't talk about Iran because that was a whole different set of issues. Iraq would be able to use these escrow accounts to deal with and finance local trade from their economies towards Iraq and back. This would bring some control over these revenues and ensure they were not being used for WMD or military related programs.

We would create sanctions assistance missions in these countries that would work closely with the local customs authorities. Their role would be to inspect closely all cargoes moving into Iraq. A third element of the new system would be to shorten the list of goods which required special UN approval. There would be three categories of goods. Preapproved items, Exception Items, and prohibited items. The first and third lists would be expanded. The middle list shortened. This would simplify the approval process and cut down on delay. It would also identify those goods which were completely prohibited. Our monitoring effort would be directly principally at stopping these goods from going into Iraq.

These proposals would be presented to the UN Security Council as a package and form the basis of a new UN Security Council resolution. I stressed in my memos that getting this new system in place was not going to be an easy task. It would require considerable pressure on the front line states and great leverage generally. That leverage would only be available to us if we could show that we were absolutely committed to maintaining stringent sanctions on Iraq. We had to demonstrate that this issue was of such great importance to us that non compliance with sanctions would have significant consequences in our relationship with the non complying country. We had to make it clear to Syria, for example, that we would not continue to allow her to disregard her international obligations under the UN sanctions resolutions.

The idea would be that we would be willing to trade away this hard-nosed old sanctions system for approval of a new more liberal, but more effectively administered sanctions and oil for food system.

To succeed we had to be prepared to force this new system down the throat of Syria and the other countries neighboring Iraq. Iran was an unknown quantity in this equation. But I assumed that they would not permit their country to become a major thoroughfare for sanctions busting trade with Iraq.



I warned in my memorandum that we had to begin this process immediately. We had to act tough on the old sanctions before we could offer the carrot of new sanctions at the UN in New York. Don't wait for the United Nations to create a resolution and then try to impose it, I said. Use the leverage that we have now to move forward and show that we're going to stand behind effective enforcement of the existing sanctions pending a new agreed sanctions system. This argued that we needed also to reorganizing ourselves to push this policy with the vigor required. I suggested that we create, as we did in the first go around with Yugoslavia, an interagency task force headed by an ambassador at large that would be given the appropriate authority to negotiate, push for, and deal with other countries on this issue. He should be seen as talking on behalf of the Secretary of State. He should be able to deal with other countries at the highest level. He should be able to bring them in line and to name and shame them as required.

This was the program that I developed and recommended.

Q: Who were they?

COMRAS: I received the full backing of two of the three Assistant Secretaries most interested in the issue. I had the full support of NEA and NP. I did not get the support I needed from IO. The IO Bureau was reluctant to create any new office or function around the Iraq sanctions. They also wanted us to work this issue at the UN in New York before placing any pressure on other countries concerning the old sanctions. They argued that we should show the international community that we recognized that the old sanctions were no longer valid and then seek support for a new package. They said that only by abandoning the old sanctions could we win any support from other countries regarding a new sanctions package on Iraq.

While I was developing my recommendations, I had the opportunity to travel with Ned Walker, then Assistant Secretary for NEA, on a mission to Jordan, Syria and Turkey to talk about the Iraq sanctions. The purpose of the mission was to follow-up on a visit made earlier to these countries by Secretary Powell. Powell had already discussed with these countries the need to reenergize the Iraq sanctions. We were asked to lay out our ideas for new sanctions. When this trip was being planned, several of us, including Rick Newcombe, the Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the Treasury Department, suggested that Walker should not go. We wanted to send a special team devoted only to the Iraq sanctions issues. We warned that sending Ned would invite discussions on other middle east issues and deflect from our main objective. We argued that the trip should be postponed until we had designated a new Ambassador at large for sanctions issues who could lead such a delegation. We did not carry the discussion.



Despite Walker's best intentions and best attempts, he was unable to focus the discussions he had with these governments on sanctions. The main issue in Jordan was the Palestinian intifada. Syria was more interested also in discussing the Palestinian issue as well as other bilateral problems in U.S.-Syrian relations. Even the Turks had an agenda different from ours. Sanctions hardly got mentioned. We hardly got a word in edgewise about the sanctions. I received only about 10 minutes to make my presentation and explain what we intended to do. Then they quickly turned the discussion away from sanctions.

Q: You keep talking about the UN. With the Russians and the French sitting as permanent members of the Security Council... As governments they were getting support. They were getting rakeoffs.

COMRAS: Its hard to understand the complex motivations that cause governments to take the positions that they take. But, I can only agree that it would have been a difficult task to convince the Security Council to adopt the new resolution we proposed. It would be difficult, but it wasn't impossible. I believe that if we had played our cards right, we would have come out with an appropriate outcome. The world was very concerned at that time that Saddam was developing weapons of mass destruction. Terrorism was soon to become the number one international issue, and to change a number of mindsets when it came to dealing with Iraq.

Secretary Powell had put forth the objective of reenergizing the Iraq sanctions. We should have given that objective the priority that Powell gave to it in his first speech as Secretary of State designee. We failed to do so. In fact, we did the opposite. Before gaining support for new sanctions we began to throw away the old. Powell himself told Congress that the old system wasn't worth saving. After that what leverage did we have to convince others to buy into a new system.

Q: Was this still under Clinton?

COMRAS: This was under the new Bush administration.

Q: Going back to the time you were dealing with sanctions in the Clinton administration, was the war solution saying, "We're never going to get anywhere with Saddam Hussein. He can outmaneuver us. Sanctions won't stop him and no matter what we do, he'll get around them. The way to do this is, the guy is weak now and let's go in and take him out?" Was there a party within the State Department or the Department of Defense that you knew of at that time...



COMRAS: I was not aware at that time that anyone was proposing new military action against Iraq. The only military action in the cards seemed to be related to our continuing to police the no-fly zone. It could be that discussions were already underway in the White House on new plans to deal with Iraq. I just don't know.

There were some outside the Bush administration that were discussing various Iraq options, including military action. This included Richard Perle. They were saying already that sanctions against Saddam wouldn't work. Powell preempted them in his first speech to the public about our policy on Iraq when he put all of his own chips on reenergizing sanctions. I took him very seriously on that. Unfortunately, He didn't follow through on it.

I think that Secretary Powell came to the conclusion too quickly that he just wasn't going to be able to get what he wanted on the sanctions. I think he got some bad advice from those who suggested that the only way forward was to charm the front line countries and our allies. He was told that we might win sympathy in the Arab world and in Europe if we admitted that the old system was no good and showed that we were willing to get rid of it before we had a replacement system. To me it was just obvious that that couldn't possibly work.

I don't think our IO leaders recognized that the old system had become very popular with the neighboring Arab countries. We weren't enforcing it. Yet it provided great channels for great profits. Everybody was earning large sums of money from circumventing the old system. And if the U.S. wasn't going to do very much to enforce the old system, why change it. In fact, it became very clear at the outset that when we put our proposal forward to the UN, the first one who said, "Never" was the Iraqis. They said, "No, no, we will never accept a new system." Why? Because the new system might have some teeth and cut into their profits.

None of these countries could say openly, "No, no, we're all in favor of the old sanctions" when they had been so critical of the old sanctions. The choices that they seemed to be pushing was, yes, get rid of the old sanctions and have no new sanctions. But they didn't even really want that because that would cut into their business.

The first time we put up a new sanctions program for Security Council discussion it got shot down by three members of the permanent five - the French, the Russians and the Chinese. So, we postponed discussion for another 6 months and once again we got shot down. Only after the events of 9/11 and a great number of concessions from us that cut back the prohibited list of goods to an embarrassing bare minimum did we get their support for a new sanctions resolution. But that new resolution never really was implemented. No work was ever done on setting up the new mechanisms to enforce the new measures. I had an opportunity to express my views about this in an Op-Ed that appeared in the Washington post on December 31st, 2001. The last line in that op-ed appeared somewhat prescient. I wrote "Of course, we have another option. We can rely on direct military action in Iraq to take down Saddam Hussein's weapons capabilities. But this course would have its own costs and consequences."



Q: You might point out what September 11th was.

COMRAS: That was the terrible attack on the Twin Towers in New York.

Q: An al-Qaeda terrorist attack. It killed about 3,000 Americans.

COMRAS: The situation with regard to Iraq looked particularly bleak in those days after September 11th. We had given up the sanctions. The oil for food program was a scandal waiting for the press to uncover. Saddam was continued to enrich his regime. He appeared to have a free hand to bring in whatever he wanted. And we believed that this included items to support a weapons of mass destruction program.

I guess we should have realized that we were headed in a war direction. A growing camp in Washington, led by Vice President Cheney and by Richard Perle and by Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz and others were already declaring sanctions as ineffective and unworkable. They had to be looking in a different direction to deal with Saddam. We didn't have any new diplomatic or economic coercive measures on the table. What was left but military action?

Sanctions play an important role in providing options. When you throw this tool away you leave few options for dealing with regimes like Saddam's. Either go to war or do nothing.

Q: Looking at this time, was the U.S. essentially carrying the burden of the world saying, "Saddam Hussein is a threat to the area and somebody's got to do something about it" and we were the only ones who were willing to do something about it?

COMRAS: I think that its clear that the rest of the world shrugged off its responsibility to deal with Iraq. But, this was due, in part, to the way we handled the crisis. Our policies lacked any real direction on Iraq until after 9/11. Then we headed straight for war and confrontation. And we did a terrible job convincing world opinion that going to war precipitously was the right action.

Q: So without 9/11 it probably wouldn't have happened.



COMRAS: Without 9/11 I don't think that we would ever have had public or congressional approval to go to war in Iraq. Public support for the war stemmed in large part from the anger generated by the 9/11 terrorist attack and a belief that Saddam was also somewhat responsible for it. The public bought the President's arguments that Saddam had links with Al Qaeda and might well provide al Qaeda with weapons of mass destruction. That's why most American supported the war.

The Clinton administration did not have public support for direct military action in Iraq. He was limited to no fly and to an occasional cruise missile. It would have been unthinkable at that time for him to convince the public we needed to deploy new American troops to the region. It never would have happened. You never would have gotten anything through Congress at that time. You needed the earth shaking shift in public opinion that came from 9/11 to be able to deal with these issues in a forceful manner - to have the option to use force.

Q: As you were doing this, were there any elements or individuals in the United States who at least had the suspicion that they were the beneficiaries of Iraqi largesse? There is a member of parliament in England who apparently had some pretty cozy deals with the Iraqis.

COMRAS: Listen, American oil companies were also making huge money from Iraqi oil. The fact of the matter is that we were the largest single importers of Iraqi oil under the Oil for Food Program. American companies, however, never were permitted either directly or by the Iraqis to receive oil lifting contracts. We got our oil from the middlemen. Others would lift and broker the oil but we would end up being the buyers of the greatest amount of that oil once it had hit the international market.

So, there were those who began to say, yes, a lot of the real money flowing in outside of the Oil for Food Program as well as within it, came from American oil companies. When this became public, the American oil companies quickly scampered to cover their backsides on this. But the fact of the matter is that they had no way of really knowing whether or not the middlemen they dealt with were playing Saddam's game.

The American oil equipment companies also had an interest in what was happening in Iraq. They competed with the French and Russians and wanted to make sure they would get a piece of the action in developing Iraqi oil fields at the appropriate time. This included Halliburton.

Q: Which Vice President Dick Cheney had been president of at one time.



COMRAS: American companies were already engaged in some discussion with Iraq concerning the supply of oil field equipment. The American companies were forbidden to undertake such negotiations directly. However, they worked on this through European subsidiaries and partners. They took a great interest in the reformulation of the banned equipment list.

I want to go back to the fiasco of the new Iraq sanctions resolution which only finally won UN approval in May 2002. I believe that in the process of negotiating that resolution we sold the store. Had it become known fully by all elements of the U.S. government, it would have been a scandal as to what kinds of sensitive items we were agreeing to allow into Iraq. This included freeing up such things as fiber optics and other sensitive computer and information technology. We literally had to buy off the Russians, French, and Chinese by allowing them to export to Iraq almost anything they wanted to.

One last remark about this sanctions experience. When we finally did get UN approval for a new resolution we did not include any monitoring or enforcement structure. In the new resolution this was left to be determined subsequently. As I mentioned above, this never happened.

Q: Turning to you, you left.

COMRAS: I didn't see any role for me when my memorandum plan was not to be implemented. After 35 years, it was time to leave. Had I known that the 9/11 attack was just around the corner I might have decided to stay and provide whatever assistance I could in responding to al Qaeda and international terrorism.

I did find a way to help out on this when I was appointed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to serve as one of five international monitors charged with overseeing how countries implemented the agreed Security Council measures against al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Q: You've been very active since your retirement. What have you been doing?

COMRAS: Yes, I have done a lot of writing and speaking about terrorism and other current foreign affairs and national security issues. I have also done some specialized work on al Qaeda financing, and on the use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool. I have also been a strong critic of our current Iraq policy.



I have written a number of opinion pieces for the Washington Post, the Financial Times, and other newspapers and journals. I am also doing some work regarding our export control regulations. I am concerned over the deterioration of international controls related to the potential development of weapons of mass destruction as well as weapons delivery systems. I am very critical of the Wassenaar Arrangement and the way it works. So much more needs to be done to deal with the real risks of nuclear proliferation, particularly in this age of terrorism.

The Wassenaar Arrangement is little more than a joke. This is the international agreement to control the export of dual use items that could have an application in developing advanced weapons systems and weapons of mass destruction. It was meant to be a successor to COCOM. Wassenaar turned those controls on their tail. It provides only for consultation and after the fact transaction reporting. I do not believe that it provides any real protection over the dissemination of sensitive dual use equipment and technology.

Q: Wassenaar being who?

COMRAS: I believe Wassenaar is the name of a city in the Netherlands. It has also become the name of an international arrangement to control dual use technology. It has its headquarters in Austria where it has a small secretariat. From time to time there are Ministerial level plenary meetings to review issues related to the control of sensitive technology exports. The arrangement works on the basis of a control list. Members agree to consult on the sale of any item on the list. If any country refuses to supply the item it notifies others of this refusal. If it has shipped the item, it will notify that it has shipped the item, but only after the fact. That doesn't permit any real consultation regarding the risks associated with the export.. The only thing that you get notified of before shipment takes place is a refusal. So it has no teeth and has had very little effectiveness as a tool.

We need to recalibrate our sensitive dual use equipment export policy as it applies particularly to rogue states and gain some kind of consensus as to what can and cannot be sold to states like North Korea or Libya or Iraq or perhaps even Iran. These are issues that need to be addressed.



In May, 2002 I was appointed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to serve as one of five international monitors overseeing the implementation by countries of UN measures against al Qaeda and the Taliban. This stems from a call I received from the chairman of the UN Monitoring Group, Michael Chandler, A former British military officer. Chandler contacted me in April 2002 and asked if I would be interested in joining the UN Monitoring Group he chaired. The group was created pursuant to a series of UN Security Council resolutions and given a broad monitoring and reporting role under resolutions 1390 and 1455. The group consists of five monitors: Michael Chandler (UK) chairman, Philip Graver (France), Surendra Shah (Nepal), General Hazan Abaza (Jordan) and Vic Comras (U.S.). Philip Graver was our arms control expert, Shah was a counter terrorism expert who had led the Nepalese battle against Maoist insurgents. Abaza was a retired air force general who was our expert on the Middle East. My principal portfolio was terrorism financing.

Our mandate included monitoring and reporting on the implement of financial and economic sanctions against named individuals and organizations associated with al Qaeda and the Taliban. The sanctions measures also included a ban on arms transfers and a travel ban.

Q: These are keyed to various countries, is that it, or to individuals?

COMRAS: No, what makes these sanctions unique is that they are keyed to identified entities and individuals. A list of those entities and individuals is maintained by the United Nations Security Council's Al Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee. (the so-called 1267 Committee).

Q: I would think there would be all sorts of cutouts, that Mr. Bin Laden would order a nuclear reactor and he would hire somebody to make the order for him.

COMRAS: You're put your finger on one of the most difficult problems. These are very difficult measures to implement. They are unique in their application to individuals and entities rather than to countries. My area - terrorism financing - included an asset freeze and a prohibition on financial transactions. The resolution also prohibits the provision of any economic resources to those groups and individuals named on the UN list. There are about 370 names on the list.

Our role was to advise the Security Council and the 1267 Committee on the effectiveness of these measures. We looked at how they were being implemented by each country and we made recommendations to the Security Council on how to make these measures even more effective. Several of our recommendations have been picked up and were incorporated in resolution 1455 which strengthened the original Resolution 1390 which created us. During our two year mandate we submitted 5 reports to the Security Council.



Q: Unlike sanctions or controls over Iraq, I would imagine this would have the enthusiastic endorsement... When you're talking about nasty individuals that you're trying to stop from getting stuff... You would have a very cooperative UN to do something about this.

COMRAS: Yes. There is a broad international consensus in support of the UN measures against al Qaeda and the Taliban. That having been said, there are also very significant systemic problems in the way in which the measures are being applied. They are not being applied evenly. There are major gaps in all of the controls. We still do not have an effective international system or strategy to deal with these terrorist groups.

Al Qaeda has been very effective in raising and transferring the money it needs for indoctrination, recruitment, training, maintenance, logistics and operations. Much of this money is raised through charities. Many of these charities are sympathetic to al Qaeda. Others are simply being duped. Many of these charities provide direct support to Madrassas or teaching centers that spread a strict Wahabi interpretation of the Koran and call the faithful to Jihad against the West.

In the United States and in many countries, we regulate charities through the application of the tax code. Other countries don't give charities that same tax status. They consider them to be non-governmental associates. In many cases charities simply go unregulated.

Another problem is controlling bank transfers to unknown entities or persons. The terrorist have used the banks to move their money. But they also use informal transfer mechanism, known for example as Hawala to mask the nature, originator and recipient of the transaction.

Q: How do you find this disparate group of 5 advisors works together as a team?

COMRAS: We are a great team. We have come together as a team that has created a synergy that I think has made our reports interesting reading, very credible, and effective documents. In fact, they usually make the headlines when they come out. One little anecdote: when I first joined the group, I was told by a senior UN official when we had just finished writing our report, "You're new to the UN. I know you guys have worked hard on these reports. It looks like a very good report. Don't get too upset when I tell you that they go nowhere. They get put into UN documents that largely go unread. Don't be hurt by that." He said. Three days later, we woke up to headlines around the world that "UN Group Finds that al-Qaeda Still has Access to Funds."

Q: I think this is a good place to stop.



COMRAS: I thank you very much for this opportunity and for your great patience and your questions and leadership on this.

Q: I've enjoyed this. Thank you.

End of interview